

STUDENTS AS
CO-CREATORS

A Disciplinary Research Collaboration

*Architecture Design Studios: Re-framing with the Empathic
Imagination in Mind*

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Architecture Design Studios: Re-framing with the Empathic Imagination in Mind

Executive Summary

Through regular co-creator research sessions, we developed a series of **research devices**, or tools, that are intended to provoke conversation and support transformative, inclusive learning and teaching practices as part of the architecture design studio. Shared exploration of the significance and possibilities of an empathic imagination in design, and imaginative empathy in learning and teaching, has helped to improve our language, communication and clarity of expression of some of the more ephemeral but essential elements of architecture design and practices in a design studio setting. Overarching this journey is a desire to shift away from the emphasis of architecture as built form (as object or geometric space) and to ultimately advocate **a collaborative, social design practice** to create a built environment for human inhabitation. As an architect, to act with or on behalf of others to produce inhabitable space, implies social processes or co-creation, and suggests an ability to understand others' wants and needs. In other words, it suggests **an empathic approach to the production of architecture**. This project brings in the additional layer of **learning and teaching**, with the architect-educator and architect-student also finding themselves in a reciprocal relationship of empathic exchange, with the 'otherness' of the architect-student needing not only to be recognised in addition to the 'otherness' of user-client, but nurtured as part of the architect-students own 'self-oriented' empathic development. The hope is that then the architect-student's cultural values and experience might then be welcomed into a space so often reserved for the perspective of 'the master' alone, with diverse representation not only in physical presence, or by numbers, but through **new voices, empowerment, and a** reimagined architectural currency.

Background and Research Questions

This is a CETI 'students-as-co-creators' DRC (disciplinary research collaboration). As such it is disciplinary investigation from within the School of Architecture + Cities which hopes to lead to new insights in relation to future altered architecture pedagogic practices. It has two main research questions:

- How and where is the empathic imagination enabled or disabled in the content and/or delivery of 'architecture design studios'?
- Could its activation support empowerment of the student voice, give currency to diverse cultural values and encourage development of alternative design practices?

There is little existing research on the engagement of an 'empathic imagination' as part of design studio practices or design processes in general. Juhani Pallasmaa, in 'Architecture and Empathy' (2015), brought the 'concept' of an 'empathic imagination' (as distinct from a 'geometric imagination') into 'architecture', but its implications or possibilities have not been explored beyond our immediate experience of the built environment and not specifically in relation to architecture education. An 'empathic imagination' and 'imaginative empathy' are more commonly discussed and applied in relation to psychotherapy, especially in Alfred Margulies's book 'The Empathic Imagination' (1989). As such, it is also implicitly demanded of this project to touch upon two related 'meta'-research questions:

- What is the empathic imagination as it relates to architecture and urban design?
- What significance might the empathic imagination have to design and educational practices?

This project sits in parallel to another, interdisciplinary CETI 'students-as-co-creators' LTRC project, which explores the idea of 'imaginative empathy' or 'empathic communication' as part of learning and teaching practice more generally. The two projects will come together in an EDI-education workshop to be enjoyed by the School of Architecture + Cities at the end of July 2021.

Description and Aims

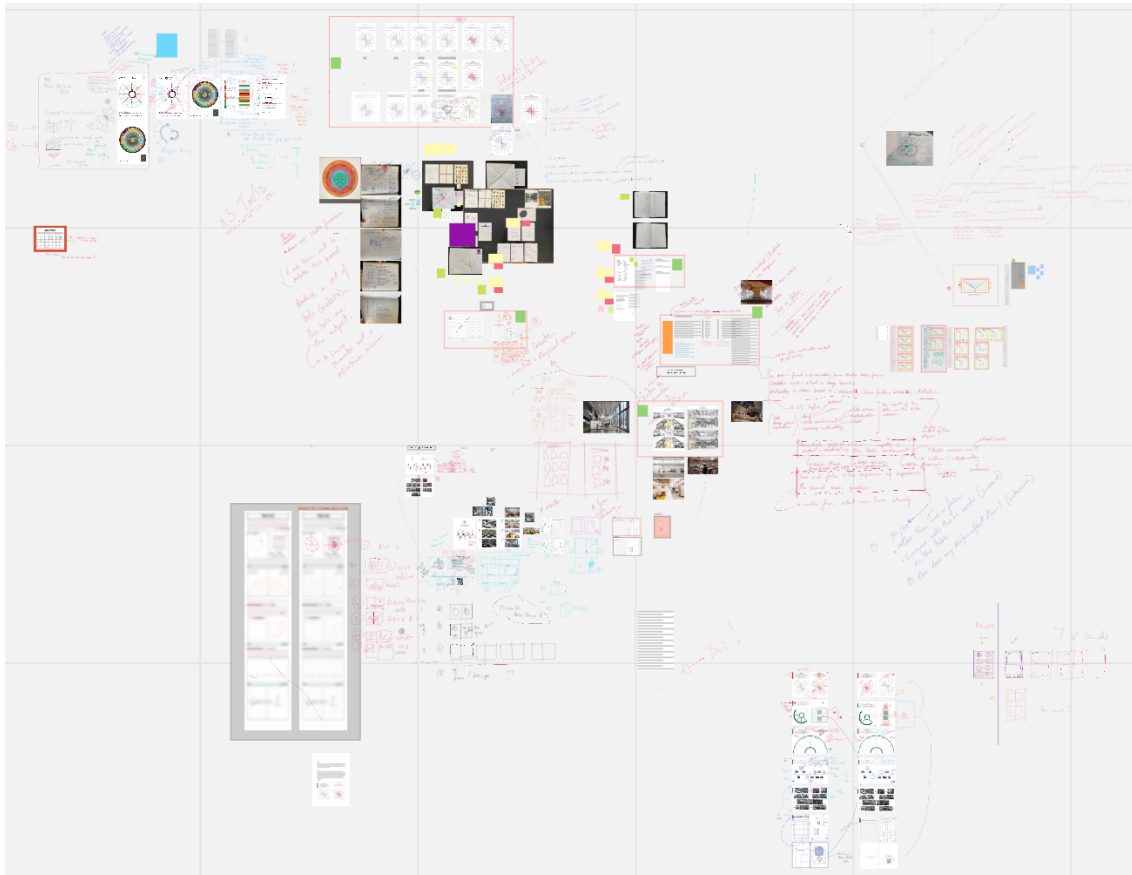
Architecture and urban design is fundamentally concerned with creating places for people to live their lives, but has to respond to many demands, whether economic, sustainable, practical or symbolic. This project aims to elucidate how a more socially or humanely driven design practice might be nurtured as part of design studio education. The ability to imagine and design for people; for oneself and for others is therefore a crucial skill to develop. Empathy and the imagination are needed in order to do this, but both are often excluded from discussions around 'good design', 'design practices', 'architectural value' or 'professional ethics'. One reason for this might be the lack of an existing 'language' or common understanding within our discipline, or simply a lack of drive for diversification and openness in the profession. It is in this gap and in the possibilities that this space creates that this research sits; building understandings, making observations, developing new ways of communicating.

Original Research Aims:

- To identify **how and/or where** the 'co-creator partners' have experienced the empathic imagination being enabled or disabled within architecture design studio learning and teaching, for example in; pedagogic frameworks / curricula / delivery techniques / self-motivated project ambitions.
- To explore **whether or not** these experiences impacted student learning, empowerment and diversification of design ideas and practices.
- To identify **manifestations** (or absences) of this empathy in design studio pedagogic material (rather than in student design project outcomes).
- To explore **different ways of representing and communicating** these manifestations (or absences) to enhance existing disciplinary language and communication about the 'value' of empathy and the imagination in design practices.
- To **set up the outcomes** of this 'informative' research project as a primer for a follow up 'transformative' research project in 2021-22 (a 'Co-Creators Curricula Design Collaboration') which would go on to identify and consider reasons and opportunities for **future altered practice** in design studio curricula and delivery.

Methods

As the project got underway, the originally planned, three half-day co-creation research sessions and the hour-long weekly partner meetings, merged. The co-creator group reduced in size as the two other academic partners were unable to contribute regularly and the remaining team met weekly or bi-weekly on 'Teams' for between one and three hours. The meta-research questions provided us with much early wider discussion, out of which we developed a shared understanding of the importance, possibilities, and significance of an empathic imagination in architecture design processes in the design studio. The conversations dwelled also on the nature and application of empathy or empathic communication as part of learning and teaching. We repeatedly used the research aims to refocus the conversation! Through these co-creator sessions we realised that the project was less about producing artefacts to share as findings after the project had ended (as originally intended), but more about the conversations themselves being transformative for each of us individually and for the group as a community of researchers. This remained in line with, if not even more aligned with the project's preliminary intention to borrow principles from, the 'Co-operative Inquiry' research method as developed by John Heron in *Co-operative Inquiry: Research into the Human Condition*, 1996. Heron related his four ways of 'knowing'; (1) experiential, (2) presentational, (3) propositional and (4) practical, with four possible types of research output; (1) self-development, (2) imaginal / linguistic representation, (3) reportage and (4) skills / transformed practices. The aim of the research sessions thus gradually shifted and we aspired to develop some **tools or devices** that would go on help other students and colleagues to have similar transformational experiences. We used a MIRO board to sketch, play and design these devices together.



Results

Co-creator commentary on the development of the tools or devices that follow as our results or 'research output':
(The colours relate to the colour coding of these tools or devices.)

The underlying objective of our methods was to tease out the main research questions; 1. How and where is the empathic imagination enabled or disabled, who experiences it and where? 2. Can the empathic imagination through its activation empower students, designers etc and what might that mean? Our thought process was that by the creation of games, would allow our participants to actively use their empathic imagination whilst playing each game, with each game tailored to collect data on this overarching question. In order to better understand the impact of empathic imagination and how and where it could be enhanced with the 'studio' dynamic. The themes of the games were born from our shared development of what we understood the design studio as a learning environment to be.

***Empathy** is a subjective term that differs depending on the individual. Our first game, **Re-identification**, aims to understand empathy through a spider matrix, inspired by the 'psycho-card game'. The matrix creates a framework to analyse and identify participants perspectives of empathy through the empathic imagination or communicative empathy in **architecture design practices and learning and teaching environments**. The output collates a series of patterned diagrams, visually representing individual empathy, but can be overlaid as a set to suggest a group output and broad empathetic enablers and disablers.*

*Drilling into design practices as developed in architecture education led us to in depth consideration of the **UN Sustainability Goals** as they have been translated by UoW SA+C into a call for altered architecture practices. These are much revered in terms of possible quantitative outputs in relation to our built environment and sustainability, but less considered are those more ephemeral, qualitative, human[e] or social aspects of how we inhabit space, occupy land or interact with cities. **Sustainable Disclosures** asks the participants to share and develop languages in this area.*

***What's the difference?** Within the architectural learning and teaching practices, one is faced with unique spaces, surroundings, and modes of practice. Each space within the studio has certain qualities that can promote or hinder empathy within architectural learning environment. Such experiences can be explored through a discussion and the use of key words by identifying if empathic qualities are present in **different studio environments**. How can we use these discussions to empower and create a future for empathic environments in architectural design and practices?*

***The Design Studio Build Your Own** was intended to be played directly after **What's the difference?** as your own personal creation of an ideal studio environment. With a plethora of objects, furniture, and more fixed elements, to allow you to explore how the potential of the empathic imagination might be embodied in the studio space and subsequently promote or hinder empathy in learning and teaching practices and in architecture design processes.*

The games, once they go live, will be up-loadable and usable as a record of this project and as research data. Going 'live' will happen first at the workshop later in July and we are also working on a blog-site that could contain links for participants to 'play' separately:

<http://blogstage.westminster.ac.uk/inclusion/empathic-immagination-reframing-the-design-studio/>

Discussion

In the original proposal we set out four areas where we saw the research as important and hoped there might be possible impact for future practices. We have left these in their original format below, as to our surprise they have subconsciously all been addressed and actioned through our sessions, interactions and devices developed. This is something we are very excited and proud of achieving.

Research importance and skill building: *As ‘co-creators’ in this project, both architect-students and architect-educators will together be researching a subject that we are already ‘inside of’ but want to understand more deeply, rather than using our disciplinary or research expertise to work on understanding something ‘outside’ of ourselves or our direct experience. We will be searching for a multitude of ‘truths’ or experiences, rather than attempting to reach a consensus. In this respect the project lends itself to be a truly collaborative experience; participatory and rooted in a commitment to **reflective practice**. It is hoped this will be a shared educational and transformative experience for all partners with real practical applications in future altered educational and design practices. All ‘partners’ - students and academics - will **practice skills** in communication, **build confidence** in sharing lived-experience and ideas and **increase capacities** to effect change. We will together; be present, practice imaginal openness, bracket pre-existing assumptions and learn to re-frame that which may think is already familiar.*

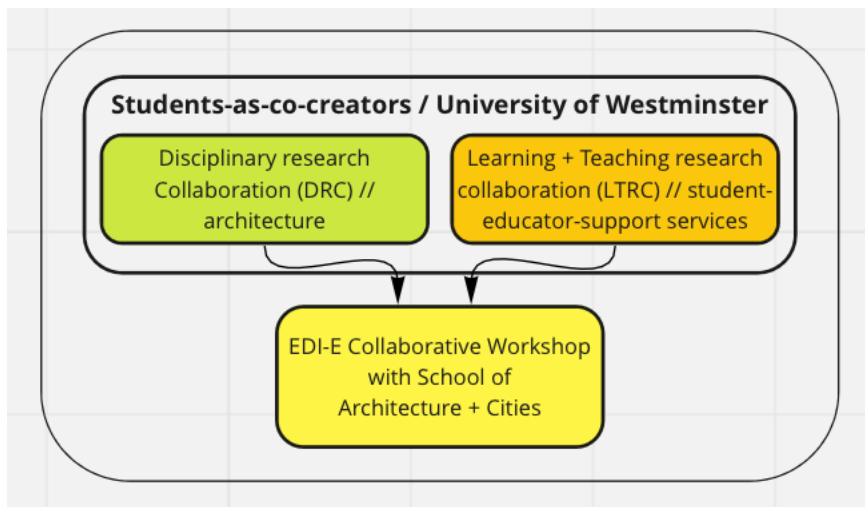
Disciplinary importance: *Architecture and urban design is fundamentally concerned with creating places for people to live their lives, but has to respond to many demands, whether economic, sustainable, practical or symbolic. This project aims to help elucidate how **a more socially or humanely driven design practice** might be nurtured as part of design studio education. The ability to imagine and design for people; for oneself and for others is therefore a crucial skill to develop. **Empathy and the imagination** are needed in order to do this, but both are often excluded from discussions around ‘good design’, ‘design practice’, ‘architectural value’ or ‘professional ethics’. One reason for this might be the lack of an existing ‘**language**’ or common **understanding** within our discipline in this area, or simply a lack of drive for diversification and openness in the profession. It is in this gap and in the possibilities that this space creates that this research sits; building understandings, making observations and developing new ways of communicating them.*

Research relevance and new knowledge building: *The empathic imagination in architecture has not been widely explored, either through theory or in practice. This ‘co-creators’ project also sits as part of (a pilot for) my PhD data-collection; as such participation in future research possibilities and theory building may ensue.*

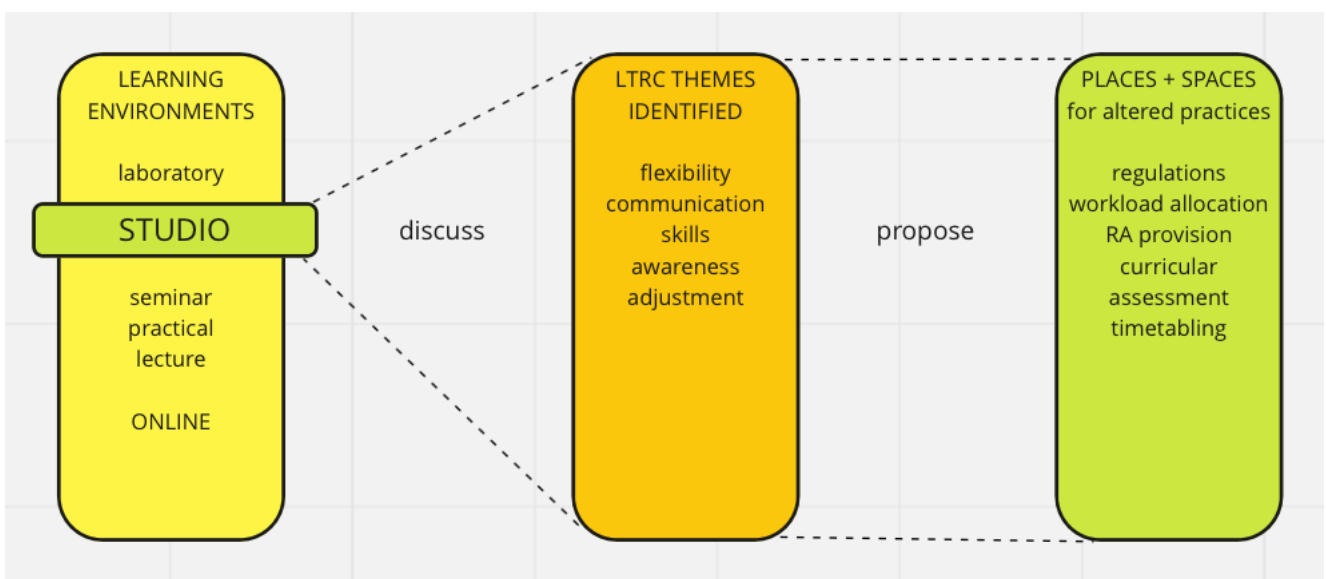
Educational and institutional relevance: *It is hoped that outcomes of this project will tie into the ongoing work of CETI in the context of developing improved, inclusive practice and in the decolonisation and diversification of the curricula; perhaps in relation to the interests of the ‘Compassionate Pedagogy Community’ and as part of the ‘Academic, Personal and Cultural Identities Community’.*

Conclusions and Future Work

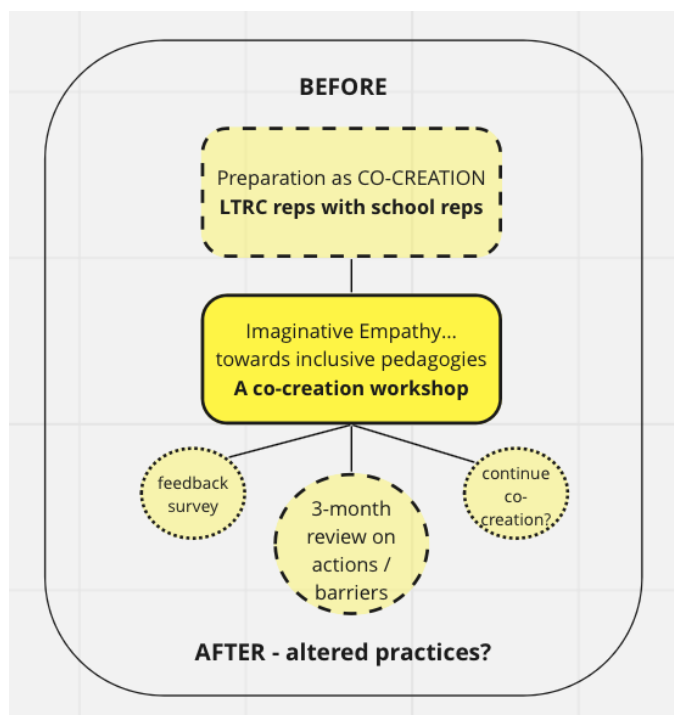
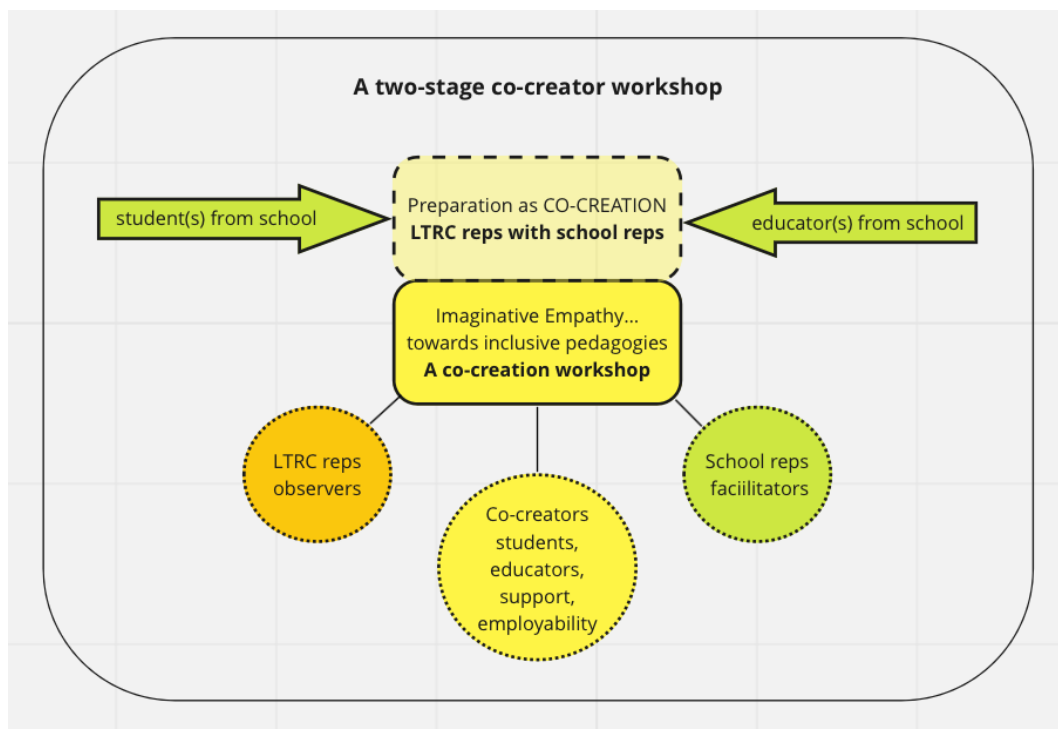
As explained at the start of the report, the output of this project – its process and conversations as well as the ‘divisive devices’ developed, will be used in combination with a workshop framework and learning and teaching themes drawn from a questionnaire developed in a parallel LTRC students-as-co-creators project. This will be piloted at the end of July with the School of Architecture + Cities. Its aim will be to explore, develop and archive (for future access) shared inclusive ‘learning and teaching’ languages, techniques, and ideas for transformed practices. The session will focus on imaginative or communicative empathy and the empathic imagination, as skills that could be elucidated and nurtured to improve student empowerment and inclusion of diverse cultural values; in learning and teaching generally and in relation to the specific learning environment of the Design Studio.



Beyond this pilot workshop, there is a vision that the ‘divisive devices’ as the outputs of this research collaboration could perhaps then also be altered as part of the tailoring of a series of workshops for a variety of different learning environments.



The intention is that the principles of 'co-creation' would persist and the dissemination of the 'results' of this project would be through the future direct engagement of students and colleagues in further workshops and knowledge generation. A cycle of layering common understandings and the start of long-term relationships and shared altered practices.



Lessons Learned

On reflection this has been a truly transformative experience. The notion of co-creation from the outside can seem a little unbelievable, but from within, the shifts in roles and relationships through the project means that in the end it is impossible to say who did what. Whilst the theme or idea of exploring the empathic imagination came from the academic partner, where the co-creators took that was a completely shared journey and will be fundamental to the development of new knowledge in this uncharted area. Learning to value and articulate what we each experience and perceive will be a skill that stays with all of us. At the beginning it was hoped that this would be a collaboration with urban design students and colleagues also and it was disappointing that the two additional colleague partners that were in the original proposal could not commit the time. In the end this perhaps was a blessing as the team of five was the perfect size to collaborate and develop shared visions – more may have been harder to manage. We are also all working together in an MArch design studio so there will be direct, if subconscious, leaks into how we deliver and experience that particular way of working next year.

We had no idea when we started to work together in April what this project would look like. The original proposal was not too far off the mark but there is no way we could have predicted the momentum or enthusiasm of this work. Learning from John Heron's Co-operative Inquiry methods led us to commit to a few key attitudes which really became fundamental to our research sessions and the to the future aim of the devices developed:

- Being **present** / prepared / **open** / patient
- Practicing the skill of '**bracketing**' / holding 'apart' preconceived ideas or assumptions
- Developing **shared re-framing** of that which we might already think familiar
- Ensuring this project's platform is a **safe space** through non-personal-attachment to subject

These ideals were not explicitly re-stated during the project but on reflection were fundamental to our working methods and group experience. The aim of the project itself, which developed from something more traditional in a research sense, to this shared commitment that the results themselves would be about future research processes or the development of tools to support further research, was novel to the co-creators. As a group of architects, we are trained to get to a proposal, an outcome, a piece of architecture. In this project we enjoyed not knowing, not striving to know but rather to explore, to build infrastructure for further not-knowing and to leave questions un-answered. And to be happy with that.