

Title

Situated Education in a Time of Pandemic

Author

Anna Colin

Using Open School East (OSE) as a case study, this text sets out to reflect on the value and redundancy of physical and architectural space in relation to alternative and situated art education, both in ordinary times and in a time of pandemic. Further to this, it explores the possibilities afforded as a result of the current public health crisis when it comes to access to education.

About Open School East

Founded in 2013 in London, before relocating to Margate in 2017, OSE sits half-way between a small, alternative art school and a local community resource that places artistic and collaborative learning at its centre. Entirely free of charge, it provides adults and young people with an environment that is informal, responsive, versatile and non-exclusive. The pedagogical modes of the school revolve around collective and democratic learning, critical thinking and a situated approach; they place learners in situations that directly connect to their experience, be it the local neighbourhood and the communities who inhabit it or subjects ranging from gentrification to social isolation.

Building on Recent History and Use

OSE has rented spaces in three buildings to date, two of which were council-owned. The first one, from which the school operated between 2013 and 2016, was the recently decommissioned Rose Lipman Library and Community Hall, built in the 1970s in De Beauvoir, East London. The second one, OSE's home in Margate between 2019 and 2020, was purpose-built as the Thanet School of Arts and Crafts in the early 1930s, before becoming an adult education centre in the 1970s. As buildings with a history of knowledge-production, social interactions, art



The old Rose Lipman Library and Community Hall, 2013. Photo by Owen Watson.



Margate's Adult Education Centre, 2019. Photo by Ollie Harrop.

education and adult learning, they have not only been fitting homes for the school, but have also provided the organisation with an insight into the adult education, literacy and community arts movements in Britain, which have inspired activities and aspects of its development. Crucially, the local, communal and public remit of

these structures has also helped to shape OSE's philosophy and its ambition to be locally relevant.

The buildings were (at least at the time of OSE's occupation) spatially organised to welcome local residents and users: each had a reception area, a social space or canteen and spacious rooms dedicated to set activities and forms of engagement. They therefore constituted the ideal spatial settings for the school, and have together inspired the blueprint for its next home.¹ Since OSE's departure, the old Rose Lipman Library and Community Hall has been largely partitioned off for creative industries' studios and offices, however Margate's Adult Education Centre is still managed as a public facility and remains architecturally intact. As one of the last standing remnants of the welfare state's public service buildings, the Margate Adult Education Centre is characterised by a strong municipal feel, outmoded furniture and old smells, yet it has a feel-good, inclusive and pre-gentrification atmosphere.

¹ In July 2020, OSE moved to a five-storey, Grade II-listed building, a stone's throw from its previous home. It was previously an accountancy firm's office and, before that, dwellings. For the first time, the space now provides each of the school's programmes with dedicated spaces and studios, as well as subsidised studios for OSE alumni and a garden.

Together in Space in the Age of Social Distancing

While collaborative learning, local social interactions and co-operation between programmes and users have been key to OSE's identity and offer, each of these ambitions has been challenged by the current pandemic. The public health crisis has further tested the usability and relevance of the space it occupies, the security of which has been fought for after a succession of short-term leases and necessary relocations. As OSE has just moved to a new (and hopefully final) home in Margate – this time a building with a long-term lease, rented in full, in which the settings and atmosphere described above will be partly replicated for the purposes of appropriate programme delivery, continuity and familiarity – it is appropriate to question the future of togetherness in space as social distancing is not only becoming the norm, but has also taught us about alternatives. This question is far from being unique to OSE; every school, university, museum and social centre is having to develop new forms of spatial organisation in order to accommodate safer modes of learning, reception and engagement.



Screenshot of Zoom session with curator Linsey Young as part of Anthea Hamilton's curriculum, Associates Programme 2020.

Since the lockdown, two of the organisation's main programmes have been transferred online. These are the Associates Programme – a year-long, part-time, semi-autonomous artistic development programme for adult practitioners, many of whom relocate to Margate for a year and often beyond – and the Young Associates Programme – a year-long, full-time, accredited art and design programme for local young people aged 16 to 18 who have experienced

disenfranchisement from mainstream education. In order for both to keep going, computers have been distributed to the young people, art materials have been delivered to the two cohorts and enhanced digital tools and literacy have been developed to support remote learning and mentoring. In spite of these logistical efforts, emancipatory and participatory learning, along with the simple but vital bonding moments that usually occur outside of structured learning hours, have been strained by Zoom fatigue, feelings of disconnection and total impossibility, which have impacted the learners' mental health – a common occurrence in the education sector at present.²

The difficulty of making eye contact with people and reading signs of disengagement during virtual exchanges, coupled with noise pollution and camera shyness – which often make one resort to general muting and blank windows instead of expressive bodies – have not only made the building and maintenance of human connection a lot harder, but have also reasserted the conventional teacher-learner relationship that many of us have fought to undo. In light of this, feelings of equity that lead to the establishment of trust, which is so crucial in an informal learning situation, have too been put to the test. As Paul Ashcroft and Garrick Jones comment in their topical book *Alive: Digital Humans and their Organizations*: 'The reason face-to-face meetings and events are powerful are because they accelerate the building of trust between people. [...] Trust comes from spending time together and problem-solving together.'³

Future Potentials

Yet, looking back at where OSE was, digitally speaking, a mere three months ago, and how it has previously accommodated learners who face physical barriers to accessing its programmes, one cannot help but acknowledge the progress that the organisation has made as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Public events are now recorded and promptly uploaded; the website has been redeveloped so as to be more accessible, intuitive and interactive; overseas guests, whose travel costs were once unaffordable, can now be invited to lead online seminars and workshops; and, critically, OSE staff, Associates, Young Associates and mentors alike have all upped their digital skills and tolerance.

Despite the limitations imposed on learning at present and the need to reimagine the future of education, Covid-19 has given OSE the opportunity to further deliver on its inclusive ethos. From bed-bound and physically impaired individuals, to European and overseas applicants for whom the school cannot provide student visas due to its independent status, through to aspiring artists who cannot afford to leave their life behind and move to Margate, the type of participants that OSE is able to welcome into its programmes may now be greatly broadened. While this prospect is currently being discussed, one of the challenges that it raises is how not to create divisions between those who attend in person – and thus engage with the building, its inner community, the local neighbourhood and its residents that are so dear to the organisation's initial project – and those who interact with the programmes digitally and/or physically, but far more sporadically.

Anna Colin is a curator, educator and researcher. She is a co-founder and the director of Open School East in Margate, an associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris and a PhD candidate in the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham. Her PhD research is titled: 'What makes an alternative space? A conceptual, organisational and physical exploration of alternative learning, social and arts centres in the UK, 1884–2022.'

² This topic has been widely covered in the media, but a particularly enlightening survey was conducted by the charity Young Minds, which was published in June 2020.

³ Paul Ashcroft and Garrick Jones, *Alive: Digital Humans and their Organizations* (Coventry: Novaro, 2018), 60.