

Chapter 45

Beyond the Object: Product and Furniture Design as Critical and Social Practice

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Abstract

In recent years, the field of design has faced a growing set of challenges. We present a series of student-led case studies examining how interdisciplinary and socially engaged design pedagogies can expand the role of the designer. Set within a multicultural studio context, students are encouraged to approach design as a critical and collaborative form of enquiry, foregrounding contextual awareness, positioning making as a vehicle for social awareness. Case studies reveal projects that develop critical design sensitivities, exploring the minutiae of everyday interactions through multimodal data collection and qualitative analysis. Situated examination of lived experiences and a re-evaluation of how artefacts might represent identity, culture, and technological values through function, materiality, and social meaning. It is understood that design should solve problems by drawing upon diverse methods and perspectives. High school programmes introduce social awareness, though they often lack the capacity to develop skills. STEM has increased emphasis on technical skills without integrating socio-cultural reflection¹. Pedagogical programmes presenting diverse approaches, systems, and contexts equip undergraduates with tools to generate new insights. This approach repositions the designer as facilitator, listener, and co-creator rather than as *auteur*.

Keywords: *Relational Design, Ethnomethodology, Situated Design, Social Engagement*

Introduction

Design education faces the challenge of equipping students with the ability to respond to social and ecological issues. Contemporary design requires sensitivity to relational and cultural contexts. The Product and Furniture Design course at UAL Chelsea follows a multidisciplinary trajectory shaped by an interdisciplinary team. Research and practice interests inform a curriculum that encourages critical reflection and socially responsive making, in line with Schön's concept of reflection-in-action².

The collaborative nature of course-making has produced pedagogical models that question notions of authorship. These models emphasise negotiation, iterative experimentation, and diverse perspectives. Home and international students bring prior educational, cultural, and disciplinary experiences. Students operate as makers, researchers, and facilitators. They generate knowledge through practice, using ethnographic methods to study everyday objects, revealing tacit social practices, which inform

¹"Design Economy: The Environmental and Social Value of Design," Design Council, accessed August 4, 2025, <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/design-economy/#c8709>.

²Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 46.

design interventions that challenge habitual behaviour or make cultural differences visible³. Critical engagement allows students to interrogate assumptions, identifying opportunities for socially responsive interventions³.

The course incorporates notional pathways: 'I, We, World', guiding students to explore personal, collaborative, and systemic design dimensions. This approach underpins three student-led case studies. *The Ecology of Action* engages local communities to co-design shared spaces, interrogating notions of participation and ownership. *The Social Object* examines how everyday artefacts acquire social and cultural meaning, revealing tacit skills and cross-cultural dialectics. *Rethinking Fans* explores material practices and cultural rituals through speculative design. These projects demonstrate how socially engaged and interdisciplinary pedagogy cultivates designers capable of critical, ethical, and contextually aware practice⁴.

Pedagogical Framework

The pedagogical model is explicitly interdisciplinary, encouraging students to engage with design as a relational, situated activity that considers social, cultural, and ecological contexts simultaneously. Methodologies drawn from ethnography and participatory research allow students to observe and interpret the dynamics of everyday life, cultural practices, and ecological impact. Students produce socially responsive, environmentally conscious, and critically informed design interventions.

Central to this approach is the repositioning of the designer from an isolated problem-solver to a facilitator, listener, and collaborator. Drawing on Freire's dialogic model of education, students co-construct knowledge through conversation, reflection, and mutual exchange while attending carefully to the perspectives of stakeholders and the environments in which their designs operate⁵. Shifting emphasis from delivering predetermined solutions to promoting a sensitivity to context and lived experiences.

Escobar's concept of relational and decolonial design provides a critical lens, examining dominant narratives and normative assumptions, encouraging students to create artefacts and interventions that acknowledge context, and multiple worldviews foregrounding interdependence⁶. Material experimentation is central, students consider how materials, form, function, and environmental impact intersect with social and cultural systems, how an object mediates interaction, expresses identity or responds to environmental constraints.

Case Studies

Building on this interdisciplinary and relational pedagogical framework, the following case studies illustrate how students apply participatory, ethnographic, and speculative methods in practice.

³Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015), 141–144.

⁴Matt Malpass, *Critical Design in Context: History, Theory, and Practices* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 107–108; Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything* (The MIT Press, 2013), 105.

⁵Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (UK: Penguin Books, 2018).

⁶Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 138.

Case Study 1: The Ecology of Action – Stockwell Co-design Project

The Ecology of Action is a hyper-local co-design initiative developed with a London community centre. The project engages residents by exploring community, identity, and shared spaces. Each year, the community centre sets a brief ensuring that work aligns with ongoing local needs while providing scope for creative experimentation.

Students approach by close observation of situated cultures and practices (Figure 1). This methodology encourages consideration of stakeholders' perspectives before the designer's individual ambitions. Students adjust their interventions in response to local priorities, enhancing social sensitivity and collaborative skills. Co-creation sessions encourage iterative dialogue, where students, staff, and community members develop solutions. Innovations include an equipped mobile workshop allowing construction of full-scale prototypes on site. Residents become closely involved as co-designers, contributing ideas, testing prototypes, and evaluating outcomes. This not only produces tangible objects but also generates insights into local identity and participatory methods. The project demonstrates how design can operate relationally as a negotiated practice responsive to the needs and knowledge of others⁷ (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Stockwell Park Community Centre selection day (Image: O. Callegaro, K. Sarkisyan, 2024).



Figure 2: Stockwell Park Community Centre Conversation Corner, Tipsey Railing (Image: O. Callegaro, 2024).

⁷Stockwell Community Centre, *Project Documentation* (London, UK: Chelsea College of Arts, 2024).

Case Study 2: The Social Object

The Social Object investigates everyday artefacts and their role in mediating social behaviour. Students explore how objects acquire meaning, reveal tacit skills, and reflect cultural norms and cross-cultural dialectics. They are equipped with flexible methods for observing and analysing objects, including video, note-taking, and observational drawing⁸.

Students undertake naturalistic experiments to understand objects from the perspective of others (Figure 3). The use of utensils, including knives, forks, and chopsticks, is analysed not simply as a perfunctory practice but as a cultural convention informing interaction. Students learn to interpret the relational and performative qualities of everyday tools (Figure 4).



Figure 3: Naturalistic experiment: Capturing 'Ordinary Affordances' (Image: J. Cleverly, 2022).



Figure 6: Sketch - people eat in circle



Figure 7: Sketch - People sharing food and feed each other



Figure 8: Sketch - how people eat while standing



Figure 4: Initial field studies, street food (Image: Y. Chen, 2024).

⁸Christian Heath and Jason Cleverly, "Discovering the Familiar: Exploring Everyday Practice in the Design of Tools and Artefacts," *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 45, no. 1 (2025): 77–93, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12597>.

This approach proposes objects that embody social practices, facilitating interaction. The project reinforces the pedagogical aim of repositioning the designer as facilitator and observer capable of interpreting subtle social dynamics and translating these insights into design interventions⁹ (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Left: Objects that require the use of the water from the tap. Right: Tap disruption machine (Image: M. Gil, 2021).

Case study 3: Rethinking Fans

Rethinking Fans is a speculative project exploring environmental adaptation, material practice, function, and cultural ritual. Students examine the history, principles, and performance of fans, considering their use across diverse contexts. Experimentation with form, function, and materiality encourages exploration of how the fan might be reconfigured (Figure 6).

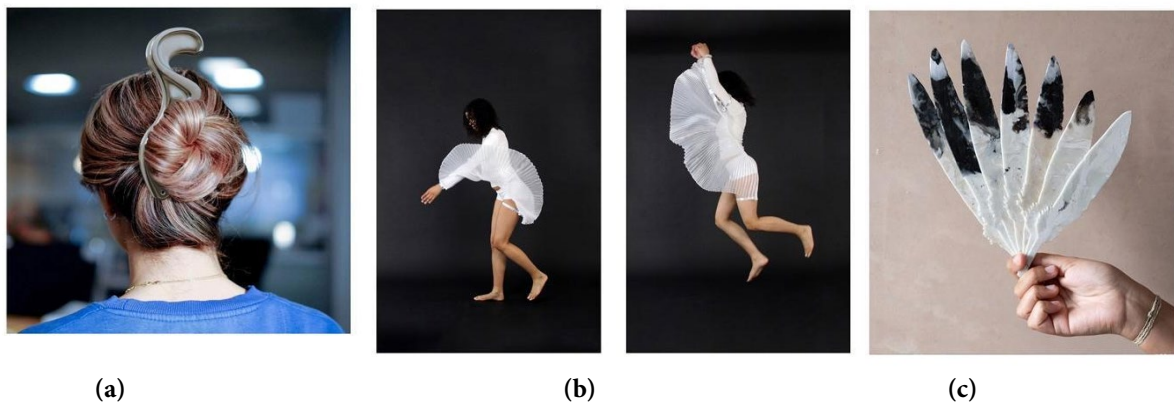


Figure 6: Rethinking fans (Images: J. Van Steen, 2022 (a); A. Digby, 2024 (b); and R. Hodges, 2022 (c)).

Through iterative prototyping, material testing, and reflection on ecological and social impact, students consider sustainability, health and well-being, fashion, communication, and cultural meaning in their proposals. The project emphasises risk-taking and inventiveness, and by connecting material practice with environmental and social considerations, it exemplifies a design pedagogy that is critically engaged, experimental and responsive to complex, real-world systems (Figure 7).

⁹Heath and Cleverly, “*Discovering the Familiar*,” 77–93.



Figure 7: Fan concept (Image: Sara Bshennaty, 2022).

Case Studies: Summary

These case studies show how socially engaged and interdisciplinary pedagogy shapes practice by cultivating designers who are critically reflective, contextually aware, and able to navigate relational, cultural, and ecological systems. Each project prioritises collaboration with communities, artefacts, and environments, positioning the designer as facilitator, observer, and co-creator rather than a detached problem-solver.

Conceptually, the studies highlight the relational nature of design, showing how objects mediate social practice, how participatory processes reveal local knowledge and identity and how speculative approaches produce new understandings of material and ecological systems. Methodologically, the projects demonstrate iterative reflexive practice. These methods produce critically informed, responsive, socially meaningful artefacts. Collectively, the case studies illustrate a pedagogical approach connecting theory and practice. Showing how design can develop practitioners capable of addressing nuanced, interconnected challenges.

Analysis and Insights

Case studies illustrate that design outcomes are not solely the result of material practice but equally shaped by relational processes embedded within broader social, cultural, and ecological contexts. Students begin to reconceptualise design not as an isolated act of problem-solving, but as a dialogic and situated practice shaped through collaboration, listening, and critical reflection. This repositions design as an inherently relational process responsive to context and attuned to multiple perspectives.

The model draws upon interdisciplinary frameworks from sociology, ecology, and critical theory. These frameworks encourage students to treat prototypes as research artefacts rather than as resolved solutions. Prototyping becomes a method of enquiry wherein the act of making elicits dialogue, revealing tacit knowledge to explore emergent possibilities. Material experimentation extends beyond form or function, a critical tool for understanding the systems in which design is situated.

The role of educators is also reframed. Rather than being solely instructors of technical competence, educators act as facilitators of enquiry, supporting collaborative learning, promoting reflexive engagement. Pedagogy becomes speculative in nature, offering a discursive space in which students and staff collectively interrogate assumptions underpinning design practices and experiment with alternative approaches. This emphasis on open-ended exploration encourages the capacity for critical awareness and adaptability, essential for navigating contemporary challenges.

Nevertheless, certain structural tensions exist. The ethos of open-ended enquiry can sit uneasily alongside the practicalities of the curriculum, which require clear outcomes and measurable progress. Risk-taking and experimental practices may be constrained by assessment frameworks that prioritise certainty and replicability. Similarly, while community collaborations offer significant pedagogical value, they are often limited by non-alignment with academic infrastructures. These challenges highlight the need for ongoing negotiation between institutional accountability and the imperative for experimental, socially responsive practice.

Conclusion

The pedagogical approach outlined here demonstrates the capacity of design education to address complex and interconnected local and global challenges. Ecological systems are conceptualised as frameworks that inform both the methodology and pedagogy of design education and position contextual awareness as integral to cultivating practices attuned to interdependence, systemic complexity, and ethics within socio-environmental contexts. Interdisciplinary frameworks encourage experimentation, approaching prototypes as tools for enquiry rather than resolved solutions. Teaching is reframed as a speculative and exploratory qualitative practice.

Of wider significance is the potential to influence practice beyond individual programmes. Integrating these methods within institutional structures might embed socially engaged and contextually aware approaches across curricula. Strengthening collaborations with communities, policymakers and other stakeholders increases the societal relevance of student practice. Sustaining institutional support for experimentation is essential, safeguarding the conditions required for risk-taking, critical thinking and reflexivity.

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