

15.11.23

I've agreed to meet with students at the end of Church Grove, at the entrance to RUSS, which is still a building site.

Today is our first site visit. We're here to meet with Eleanor, the acting managing director of RUSS, and Caroline, a neighbour and long-standing supporter of RUSS. The students will ask them questions to support their ideas for facilitating the event on the 3rd December.

4 students are already there when I arrive, and I notice Eleanor emerging from the site. She asks that we move to the end of the street, away from the house [...]

It's cold, bright. I feel achy, I'm recovering from a virus and my throat feels like moss. I'm desperate to tell the students it's my birthday, but I can't think of a good enough reason to and I'm concerned about centering myself in the day too much. This a cherry on top of my reluctant birthday cake, on top of the other ways in which I'm wrestling with the centrality of my position within the project, the vulnerability I feel at that centrality and the feelings of guilt I have that the stirrings of my imagination have now manifested and that students, RUSS members and UAL staff can see through that truth, are willing to participate, support and co-construct something that emerged from an idea I had. Think Mierle Ukeles here and the idea of centering oneself vs. problematically obfuscating oneself too much.

We wait on the corner of Church Grove, I try and usher the students into a kind of semi-circle to keep some of the pavement and the street ramp free for passers by. The restricted shape of our group, awkward and titled on the pavement, seems to mirror the post-viral claginess in my mouth. But this engagement with our collective shape, this sudden awareness of our occupation in physical space - a makeshift space of both refuge and gathering - the winter light pricking our eyelids, our throbbing ears; these are exciting feelings to associate with learning.

'It would be worth asking wider questions about the scheme - questions that might help with decisions that you might not yet foresee', I say in a way that I hope is both direct and encouraging.

I have asked the group to collectively draw up questions that they might like to ask Eleanor and Caroline. I created a shared document for them all to write in questions anonymously, and included the following at the top of the page:

#### **Question Sheet for RUSS**

As discussed in our meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> October, here is a shared document for us to input the questions that we have about RUSS that we can ask staff (Eleanor Margolies, Anurag Verma) and residents.

These could be questions about the history of the organisation or the future of it, for example. They could be big questions, small questions, and they might be open questions that you want to ask a number of different people to get different responses. They might also be connected to an idea you have about the neighbours event.

No question is too silly, though I would add that it might be worth having a brief browse of their [website](#) for a potential answer to your question if it's a straightforward one!

I will attempt to respond the ones I know the answer to!

Below that message, I added a few of my own questions which I hoped might prove as exemplars for the kind of engagement I was hoping to facilitate with RUSS and their context:

*'What other land trusts have informed RUSS's approach?*

*How do you maintain a relationship with a local authority over a long stretch of time, in RUSS's case, Lewisham?'*

[-] tells me that a few of the group [-,-,-] got together yesterday to drum up some questions to add to the document. I've noticed that none of the 21 questions inputted are about the history or operations of the land trust - all are centred on the neighbours' event.

[-] says they did have some questions about the context but in order to be 'professional' they took these questions out. I ask what they mean, and they clarify that they were cautious of asking questions that they might, somewhere online perhaps, have 'found the answer to independently'.

I suggest it might be worth asking questions that feel important but for an 'as yet unidentifiable reason'. 'Why?', jokes [-].

Once the rest of the students arrive, we walk together back down the thin, one-way street. I am leading a group of students down a street that I have walked down twice, three times a week, every week, for the last seven months.

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Later in the afternoon, the students and I are sat, cups of tea in hand, around a big wooden table, with Eleanor and Caroline in RUSS's community hub.

It is only now, being with the students, that I see the space anew, through their eyes. It's a messy space, this space where we conduct RUSS board meetings, where the team self-building their homes on the adjacent site store their equipment. The shelves with faded yellow helmets placed precariously upside down, the many piles of folded hessian dust sheets and old buckets pushed to the corners of the room. I realise that I want the students to take this in, their feelings at the first sight of this space could be important indicators of the potential assumptions that we carry about the spaces we deem fit for learning, for discussion - assumptions that we could later unpack as a group. Not knowing how to express this, I worry that inviting the students to look around might alienate Eleanor and Caroline, both of whom have prepared to answer questions from the group.

Perhaps we could all have taken 5 minutes to sketch the space, or to document through free-form writing our relationship with this space at this precise moment? Perhaps Eleanor and Caroline might appreciate re-viewing this room, taking a moment to consider this space an articulation of the values they have worked so hard to embody through RUSS's strategies? Perhaps the students might be drawn in by the idea that we could develop a practice of both conceptual and self-investigation, through a continual reflection on our

relationship with the same space, over and over and over and over? Surely this would help me communicate one of the many theoretical threads I'm trying to help the students identify - the many ways that we can use and think differently about land, that we can de-commodify it, learn from it, learn through it. Why don't we also do that at the college?

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Before the students begin asking the questions they've prepared, Caroline and Eleanor, introduce themselves and the role they play in supporting RUSS. As Caroline is describing her enthusiasm for the event the students are to facilitate, she explains that there is a small minority of residents - 3 households - living on Church Grove who are against the RUSS housing development at the end of their cul-de-sac. Eleanor begins to describe how they have voiced their concerns about the scheme. These residents have posted on social media, had articles published on local press websites, tied an anti-RUSS banner to one of their gates, and regularly approach people entering the RUSS site to tell them the issues they have with the scheme.

This moves us into a discussion about NIMBYism. Two of the students consider there to have been 'misinformation' on the part of RUSS. When explaining that they have been provided consistently with all information available, Eleanor does the thing with her hands as if she's weighing an hourglass on its side.

Sometimes all 'normal angles have been tried' I say

'How might we hold these two ideas in our heads?' I say. On the one hand, artists can generate new forms of communication that completely reframe social relations. On the other, sometimes there's just no convincing people.

Two students raise the idea of generating work for the event that is about posterity.

'Could we maybe film attendees answering one question each?'

'What question?'

'Yeah - not sure.'

Many - if not all - of the students' ideas about the event are half formed thoughts. That's ok. Though perhaps, another thing to raise in the next meeting, with all the desk-based research you've done, you might want to come to the next meeting with some more rounded ideas so RUSS members don't feel as if they're giving you permission?

Then on practicalities - 'Will we have to clean this space?'

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On the tour of the RUSS building, three students stop at the top storey balcony looking out over Wearside road for what feels like a long time. I try to note the sensations they're experiencing.

... the height of the balcony  
their perspectives as they silently looked out over the neighbouring streets  
what they can see from up here that they couldn't see from down there  
their exposure to open air  
this land that is no longer a commodity  
their own bodies standing side by side  
the information they have just gleaned from the discussion  
the fact they must return to college this afternoon  
the fact they may remember this moment when they think of de-commodified land  
the fact they must return to ground level ...