

The First Half Year

Planning for the art and design department at Countesthorpe College, Leicestershire.

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The last six months have been a time of considerable stress for the staff and the students at this new school. This has been particularly true for those of us who are concerned with the creative arts, crafts and design. We opened in August 1970 with an incomplete building, designed to fulfill the function of an unstreamed upper school and community college. The initial intake was of the order of eight hundred of whom about three quarters were of middle school age, the rest of first year upper school age. This intake was also far from being homogeneous, not least of all in respect of previous experience in design studies.

Although the college has already received much publicity and has, perhaps become the subject of some controversy, there is little that is completely new taking place at Countesthorpe. What is being attempted, is the putting into practice in one school of many innovations already being carried out in many other places. Even so, students and staff joining the school find a great deal that seems new and not a little disturbing. It is certainly true that many of our difficulties stemmed from confused expectations of one sort or another.

A big problem for the art and design department was the fact that our purpose built study areas, were not ready for use and were not to be ready for complete occupation for a full five months. We were a team of nine, mainly experienced teachers, appointed because of our sympathy for the aims of Countesthorpe and to current developments in the field of design education.

Our present programmes have grown out of much protracted discussion during these early months. We have all found it necessary to qualify and adapt our original ideas and having done so, feel that we may be on the threshold of valuable developments.

From the beginning, we decided that our objectives should be centered as much as possible upon the individual needs of students and we all agreed that while we were awaiting the completion of our study areas, we should not confine our actions to a mere holding operation, but that the situation should be exploited by involving students as quickly as possible in positive activities, even if somewhat improvised. We had the use of two large and very unsuitable spaces, which were scheduled for eventual use as community areas, hardly any furniture and only the simplest of materials at our disposal. The first of a series of projects, run on a rough and ready team teaching basis, resulted in the production of constructions in newspaper, which in a matter of weeks grew in size and numbers to the point where it became necessary to carry out "ritual" burnings in the

grounds of the school.

Our position improved after the half term holiday, when a third of the design area became available. Although this resulted in a fragmentation that was difficult to tolerate, it did mean that a start could be made on the task of physical organisation and upon plans for diagnostic work with students. At this stage, most work, even in graphics and ceramics, which now had a home, was ad hoc in nature. Various members of the team were working in improvised situations to the accompaniment of the noise of builders' hammers and saws. Everyone suffered from the rapid turnover of borrowed furniture and the problems of storing materials and work in progress. Very gradually, or so it seemed, more of our area became available and further equipment and material was delivered so that by January 1971 we found ourselves occupying our proper home.

The finally completed area of study encompasses activities in the following disciplines, each with its appropriate space in the context of the whole mainly open plan complex.

- A. Visual and Plastic Arts and Crafts.
 - Graphic Design.
 - Painting and Drawing.
 - Pottery and Ceramics.
 - Work in Fabric and Thread.
 - Sculpture and Construction.
 - Photography.

- B. Studies based upon Wood, Metal, Plastics.
 - Carpentry.
 - Metalwork and Engineering.
 - Silversmithing and Jewellery.
 - Design Planning.
 - Various connected studies, e.g. Technical Drawing.

- C. Home Economics.
 - Cookery.
 - Nutrition.
 - Home Management.
 - Child Care.
 - Interior Decoration.
 - Advertising.
 - Dress design and appreciation.

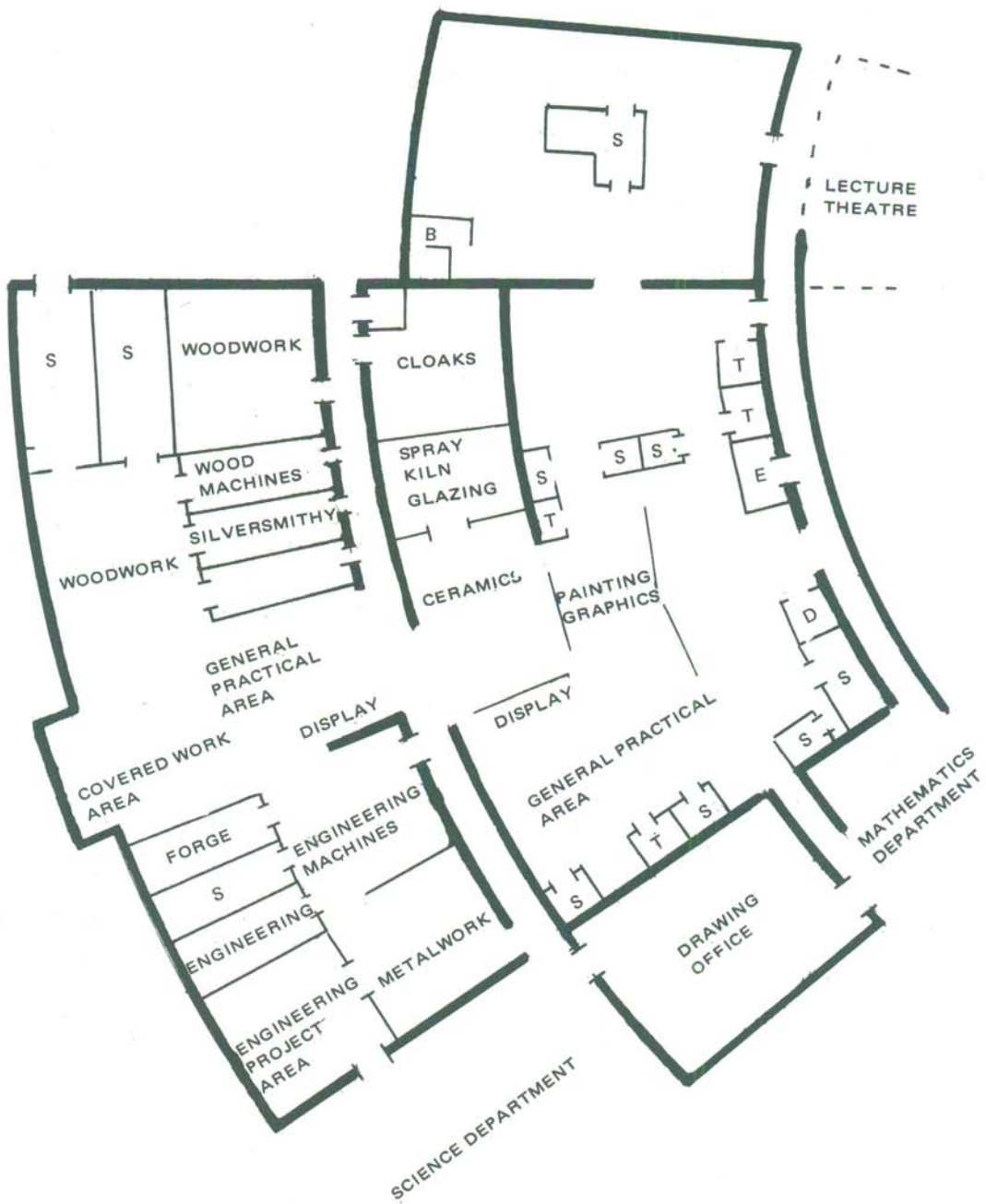
During this early period much time and effort was spent in working out general policies for the department. In doing this we were obliged to anticipate probable developments, both physical and organisational. Another factor is the agreed policy within the college, that such decisions should be arrived at democratically. This has resulted in more protracted discussion and argument than any of us had experienced in other schools, but has also made it possible for decisions to be based upon wide

agreement and has left us in the position where each member of the team enjoys a clear understanding of the ideas and approach of other members.

One of the chief factors in working out our programmes has been the organisation of the students' timetable. At Countesthorpe it has been decided to open a large part of this to independent choice by individual students. Another important element is that all students will attend design studies for a substantial part of their time throughout their school life. This means that a student will work in design for one half day each week and that this will be extended, in the majority of cases, by up to another half day. In the case of students who develop a special interest or commitment, the independent choice time could be expanded to allow as much as one and a half days, making a total of two full days of design work. The emphasis individual students will wish to give to such work will vary considerably as will the particular activities within the department. In consequence the arrangements we make, must be flexible which, while providing a broad experience in creative disciplines, must also present opportunities for the development of special individual emphases in particular activities. This has led us to carry out a detailed diagnostic exercise, to determine the interests, preferences and capabilities of students and to the working out of courses to give as much scope for variation as possible, while maintaining a workable balance in teaching groups across the range of departmental activities. In effect, this has now resulted in a core time rotational system based on three periods of time spent in activities (largely student chosen); these periods being A. The first half of the 1st year. B. The second half of the 1st year. C. The whole of the 2nd year. In studies undertaken in independent choice time, a more flexible system will obtain, whereby a student can spend as much as two full years in one discipline as a depth study, or experience a range of disciplines on a termly basis.

In deciding upon the extent to which an integrated approach could or should be embarked upon, there seemed to be two factors which demanded consideration. The first was largely a matter of deciding what degree of integration was possible without making artificial connections between different areas and, leading on from this, how much thematically based integrated work could be attempted, which would capitalise on genuine development from one area to another. It seemed to all of us that because of the value of an integrated programme, we should, where appropriate, try to evolve strategies of this nature. On the other hand, it is useful to distinguish between the various activities which will take place. There seems to be a range of creative work which has an intuitive basis and other areas where a more rational and objective approach is expected. This variation in emphasis appears to be reflected in the personal preferences of students, and while it is recognised that no clear cut separation of such areas would or should take place it is clear that unless they are recognised, genuine integration would be handicapped.

Undoubtedly, our biggest single advantage lies in our architectural provision. Many of the difficulties of accessibility one often meets in building integrated work between departments, simply do not exist. The circular layout of the school means that all departments are close and this has already been exploited in the setting up of a vigorous project in control technology by the design and science departments. Within the design department itself, physical proximity between areas makes combined and complementary



- S - STORE
- T - TEACHERS
- D - DARK ROOM
- E - EXPERIMENTAL ROOM
- B - BEDSITTING ROOM

Art and design department, Countesthorpe

activity even more possible. Not least among the advantages of the open situation is the opportunity it gives for staff to work together in a direct and natural way. Students quickly profit from the visible evidence of relationships between disciplines.

The general layout of the department, like all things, falls short of perfection. The provision of storage space is far from adequate, either in amount or in location. I suppose it is unlikely that any teacher of practical subjects is ever going to be completely satisfied with the storage space provided. In general however, the main layout is both functional and attractive. The open plan presents certain security problems with regard to permanently fixed equipment and material, but seems to diminish difficulties of control and safety. The irritation of noise which might be anticipated when several groups were working in fairly close proximity, is certainly present but is by no means insurmountable and it does appear that students realise the necessity of acting with restraint in this regard. There is a feeling amongst staff that we should construct various additional physical elements within the main complex; not with the aim of separating different areas but to give specific areas rather more identity. Perhaps the biggest single gain we all recognise from the open plan is the real support in teaching that results when more than one teacher is readily available to meet students' needs. This advantage is especially clear in the case of young teachers without much experience and with student teachers.

Our general feeling about the effectiveness of the physical arrangements, might be summed up by saying, that what has been lost on the swings, (the closed room situation), has been more than made up for on the roundabouts. To say very much more about ourselves at this stage would be to prognosticate on somewhat 'shaky' evidence. But it is possible to close by mentioning the most important immediate action we are engaged in and commenting on the gradual change which has taken place in the attitudes of students and staff.

We were, at the beginning, cautious about putting into operation a definite teaching system. Because of the difficulties already touched upon, we were constrained to work to rapidly changing and unpredictable circumstances. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, we now find that we are faced with a genuine need and a real possibility of creating a worthwhile integrated situation. What we decide to do from this point will, we believe, gain from the experiences of this early period of improvisation. We have all noticed a change in attitude to the school situation, both in the ways in which we as staff approach our task and in the way in which students respond. This change seems essentially one of greater flexibility and openness; a consequence, one concludes, of recent necessity and the policy of open democratic appraisal. There is no doubt in our minds that the future will hold as many and probably more difficult problems. We are optimistic but not sanguine about what lies ahead.