

An Exploding SCHOOL!: A talk with Nils Norman about using the environment as laboratory and classroom.

“There is nothing else to learn besides the city.”
John Bremer, first director of Parkway School

Sarah: The Exploding School is a continuation of your older work that locates the ideal educational experience outside of the institution. This idea is drawn partly from the book Streetwork, The Exploding School, by Colin Ward and Anthony Fyson that describes some educational programs that spaces outside the classroom to conduct “classwork”. Colin Ward is an urban planner and architect who writes about housing, population, urban culture and education from an anarchist perspective. He emphasizes collective self-management of necessary, quotidian institutions. Can you talk about your encounter with Colin Ward and his work?

Nils: I first read his book Anarchy in Action when I was a teenager, until my parents confiscated it, and so that made me want to read it even more. I picked it up again in my twenties at which time I found really helpful because it gives you an overview of certain of his ideas like adventure playgrounds and also something called “plot lands” which is quite interesting. There are other things; it’s a great reference book cause it dips into lots of different key words, which makes it a good book to go back to pick up other ideas. So I wrote to him to ask him more about his idea for plot lands, which are informal holiday spaces and little areas where working class people have made their special homes without architects. A couple of years ago Ward wrote a book about them called Arcadia for All.

S: Is that kind of like the German Schrebergarten, where families have a small plot outside of the city to garden and relax in?

N: Yes it’s in that tradition, but it’s different. There’s a tradition here of informal and makeshift and porta-cabin-like structures that came up after the war, where working people were making their own little villages and towns from these structures. And he used that as an idea, together with the adventure playground, as a way of thinking about how to make cities. Plot lands are also related to this thing called the “Non-plan” that Cedric Price was involved in. It was about taking an area of a city or a town and removing all building and health and safety regulations in order to allow people to experiment with building in it. Those were the things I was interested in. I wrote asking him more questions about it because I was a bit suspicious of it. It seemed to be very close to the neoliberal idea of free market capitalism and I just wanted to know what his thoughts were about it.

S: Could you talk a little about how you became interested this anarchistic use of space by people? Because I think it would be a foreign notion to most individuals growing up in a city, especially when most spaces are under control by some entity or institution. I sometimes wonder if this sensibility is more accessible to someone who has lived in a place under transition, such as a suburb still under construction as I was, or a war-damaged city (such as Berlin was for many years), or one that has decayed from neglect like the South Bronx in the seventies.

N: When I was around the age of ten, my parents moved to Seaside, which is a small town on the south coast. For a pre-teenager it was kind of a shock, but it is an interesting place to live. The thing about a town with a seafront is that they often have some kind of interface or promenade where the town meets the sea that is very much an uncontrolled and unsurveilled public space. This makes it quite interesting in terms of these ideas because you can do a lot of things in the evenings there that no one really sees or finds out about. It's actually a kind of cool space. It was a place where you could do stuff and it was very temporary but you were left to your own devices more than if you were on the town square or on the streets—that would be more difficult to do these kinds of things.

S: Who would be using this space?

N: Teenagers pretty much but the town was famous for lots of old people living there.

S: Of course it is teenagers who need to get out of their houses—away from the old people! They need to have someplace to be. Colin Ward has written a lot about how young people use space, and has been a defender of the right for youth to use public spaces, and to not have to experience the boredom of enclosure in a school. In Streetwork, he examines instances in which civic planning dilemmas become the basis for curricula. What do you think this book is doing, and how does it inspire your course?

N: Well the book he wrote together with Anthony Fyson is more of a survey of that kind of activity but there is little about putting it into practice. It wasn't necessarily for art school but it was for students from high school to learn urban studies and architecture and urban planning and I was kind of informed about that book through Anarchy and Action. I was thinking about the teaching, and also about the writing of Patrick Geddes, the Scottish urban planner. He had similar ideas, such as the outlook tower, where your institution is in the tower and the tower has different levels that represent different parts of the city and different historical parts. I think they mention the tower in the Exploding School book. And in terms of making public art, and the way public art was going in terms of artists being invited to start doing larger cultural regeneration projects, I thought that way of teaching fitted in more into an awareness of the city for public art projects rather than just making a sculpture or something like that. And I thought that it was a very special way of teaching things about the city that would be valuable to artists who were interested in doing public art projects.

And as culture and urban regeneration becomes more ideological and more built into city and government ways of thinking about changing cities around by using artists and developing artistic techniques, I thought that it would actually make more sense to develop a special class around it.

S: Please talk about the Chicago class, *Spaces of Utopia*, and about some of the things you did with the students. On the website it shows the first class entailed participation in *Critical Mass*.

N: The Chicago class was a first experiment in developing it as a more structured seminar. I did a similar thing in Geneva as well but in Chicago it was interesting because the majority of students were from disciplines other than art, from economics and the humanities and geography and the urban studies department.

S: How did students respond to that idea of moving around the city? Were they eager to leave the campus?

N: Some of them had not even taken public transport before, or to the extent that we had to, and they had not been to those areas before and so that was interesting for them. But they certainly were not prepared to do some of these things and you could see it because of the the clothes they would wear and the shoes and stuff were not particularly practical and you could tell they had not ventured off campus pretty far yet.

S: So you guided them to places in the city they would not have gone to, perhaps with particular goals in mind. How did you describe these to the students, as concerns of environmental studies, or, or urban space, or just public art?



Exploding School
students at the
Resource Center in
Chicago, Fall 2005

N: I see it as analyzing the city and looking around about and exploring the city in terms of public art making, public projects and the interdisciplinary nature of public art projects. It is related to the idea of multiple ecologies that Felix Guattari talks about; how to see the city in much more complex way, with these different kinds of ecologies that exist side by side; its not just about kind of ecological issues, its not just about one thing or the other things; its about all these things layered and intertwined.

S: So far as I understand, you are determining the curriculum, deciding you are going to study certain kinds of things and these are the sites we are going to visit. I noticed in Chicago that there were some experiments in how the students would do it but it still had

the mark of the assignment and the syllabus. Is it possible the students would start to determine for themselves what it was that they wanted to do?

N: In Chicago and Geneva things were more controlled by time, with only one day a week for the semester, so there were restrictions. In Denmark it's a longer project, because I basically run the department there and can set the curriculum. I am using the exploding school as a model for the curriculum for this class and that makes it more interesting because the students can define a lot more what it is they want to go and see and what they want to talk about and it makes it better by opening it up more to the students.

S: Does that mean you will be able to develop a different way of evaluating their work in terms of time?

N: I'm wondering if we will just go over the same areas anyway. I have a lot of foreign students and they're just there for a year on an exchange. I have a French student and a German student and an Austrian student and they bring in a whole different viewpoint but the majority of the students are Danish and so I assume we will run out of places, or that we will just revisit some places with a different viewpoint. Hopefully we will not run out of places to visit.

S: I would speculate that the places might not be the same; that they might well have changed. But you might be the only person carrying that memory, so there might be need to institute some kind of record keeping which could be interesting. But also it occurs to me that within the framework, when it gets back to art, it hits back against a barrier again and it sets up the challenge for you guys to explore that boundary even more aggressively.

N: I've also set up some projects where we go and visit certain sites. I was approached by the Roskilde Music Festival, which is quite a big music festival in Europe, asking me to do something during the festival. So I got together with the students and we're going to develop a kind of camp to invite different scientists and ecologists to come to the festival and look at it together with us and go on walks and hang out, to consider it as kind of a problem in terms of sustainability and how some of those issues might be solved or resolved. So will have an encampment within the festival where we'll meet people and start our tours and hang out during the day, and look at the bands during the night and stuff. And hopefully we won't be totally covered in mud and exhausted from drinking all night and stuff.

S: You will be studying, meeting people, working, listening to music and probably drinking. "Freedom" is a messy ideological artifact from the seventies, but is this examined in these projects? I am curious about how allowing personal 'freedom,' of how to use educational time, might inject changes in how an environment and is perceived, and in how social structures are reproduced. And I wonder if it possible to disrupt the forms of authority students are already accustomed to, whether they are practiced on an institutional level, or through various forms of intimidation. How do the people work

together and how do young people who are not accustomed to taking an initiatory role find a place where their voices have weight? In the United States my experience is that the students are unwilling to expose themselves; vulnerability is really terrifying.

N: I think it is always difficult to throw groups of students together and ask them to start collaborating. I think it is always an issue. It creates a situation, which is not necessarily natural; these students would not ordinarily do that. I don't know if I can answer that because I think it is different from student to student.

S: Are the students able to initiate things themselves? What if they didn't do anything and you came back?

N: That happens most of the time. What I am trying to do is kind of force them into a situation of self-organization and independence where they begin to do things on their own and not have to rely on me as their dad or something. That is what I am trying to develop. But I'm not sure how practical that is; that is just the beginning of trying to do that. Where I just become more of a facilitator than anything. They still kind of need someone to help them. There are some people who are good at steering, luckily. There's a core group of students who are very into what's going on, and into organizing stuff, and they carry the class. But usually I come back and they haven't really done anything. Which is fine. But that means we have to work even harder together when I'm there. Interestingly now, I was invited by the Frankfurt Kunstverein to project with them together and they were even supposed to go to Frankfurt together and it will be interesting to see what they came up with. [*This will be a play structure for the museum, with the students collaborating with Danish artist Palle Nielsen.*]

S: To what extent is the question thrown back on education itself as a subject? How conscious is this process of investigation for the students—this attempt at self determination, or the idea of acting autonomously as citizens, as artists or students, or as people who live in specific spaces being able to determine what it could be, in this case, for exhibition, or perhaps even for something more permanent...

N: I think it is different from institution to institution. For example, the French students I meet are still taught in a very traditional way and for the ones I've had in my class, this way of teaching is completely new and it is rather revelatory. They've told me that this is quite a special thing for them, and I'm not saying because of me, but because of the way the students interact together and looking at the city in a different way. And France, I think is much more studio based, a much more traditional way of thinking about art-making.

S: So they are experiencing a lot of things at once, so one of them is this "freedom," whatever, another is "looking at the city in this whole new way," and another might for some people be an historic one, where they start to trace back to another moment of inquiry.

N: Yes. And, well, jokingly I was trying to develop a class where I don't actually have to turn up, where they just do it, and in the end my role becomes kind of obsolete. I just become a kind of facilitator, and I administer, and maybe even they end up developing the budget themselves as well. I just kind of lose my job basically. But for that to happen I think would be kind of difficult but that would be a way of looking at it.

S: Will Bradley spoke about this in his curatorial class at California College of Art, that if the students could get it together, they could take the small fortune they pay to the school and start their own institution.

In what ways do we reinscribe the authority of these institutions? In a case like that, might the institution fire you? Hypothetically I would also be curious about the reverse; could the students fire, or hire you? To what degree do they see the institution as tools they can use to create new frameworks for art and society that reflect their interests? Perhaps this is more easily phrased as a question about the relationship of today to experimental educational initiatives of the past; how do you see today as being different in terms of the things that young people desire compared to 30 years ago?

N: I think it's different from institution to institution. I was talking to students in New Mexico, in Albuquerque and their conception of that kind of activity is so different from say, students working in Berlin or Denmark, so it really varies from place to place. And I think it also kind has a lot to do with the teachers and the institution and what sort of ideology they're peddling. If you go to Columbia University for example, what's being peddled there is a very conservative market based ideology that's being reproduced in the institution. But then when you talk to students they're actually desperate for another kind of activity. I think they are kind of conflicted because the institution reproduces this gallery driven way of being an artist and the students themselves seem to be quite desperate for something else besides the idea that you have to be a gallery artist to give your work any value.

S: I wonder what this desperation says about the desires of these students, and their aspirations for art. I kind of jump to conclusions based upon my own perceptions of the world, but it would be more interesting to hear from them; what do students want?