Norman Potter's teaching spaces

James Langdon

Norman Potter was an outspoken designer and teacher who left an indelible mark on British design education. In 1964, he led the development of the Construction School at the West of England College of Art in Bristol, which he imagined as the British successor to the Bauhaus. James Langdon has been researching Potter's legacy, in all of its complexity, for many years. Here, Langdon follows Potter's trail from the British Film Institute to Bristol and to rural France, in order to unearth some of the pedagogical persuasions of this influential but complicated figure.

Ten thousand students

At the British Film Institute in London, I have an appointment to view a film called *Art — To A Degree*.[1] Made for UK television and broadcast in 1976, it was part of the long-running 'Omnibus' series of arts-related documentaries. I collect the VHS tape from a kind man in a cramped basement office. Racking from floor to ceiling is loaded with the black casings of several generations of AV equipment. He shows me to the viewing room. A table against one wall runs the length of the room, leaving a narrow gap for two chairs. There are stacks of players and monitors and a tangle of cables. The machine that I am to use appeals against its redundancy on its case: 'VHS to DVD transfer' and 'HD up-conversion'.

A shimmy of static introduces the opening images. An announcer speaks to camera in a television studio. 'In tonight's film, by Philip Donnellan, two people take a journey through the labyrinth — and that's what it is — of British art education.' The film reports on the state of art and design education in the UK, particularly in light of profound upheavals that redefined the field in the 1960s. It is presented by a prominent English graphic designer, Ken Garland, and Lil Smith, a trade union convener whose role is to ensure the legibility of the report to the audience. 'She's our representative, asking the kind of questions the general public might want to have asked', the announcer says.

The journey begins in Bristol. Garland and Smith are driving a small beige Renault. Out of the window, the Clifton Suspension Bridge appears in the misty distance, spanning the Avon Gorge. 'What's the point of us coming on a wet day?' asks Smith, sarcastically. 'We are here to celebrate the great design achievement of Isambard Kingdom Brunel', replies Garland, glancing away from the road to admire the view of the bridge. 'This was put up in the 1850s. Brunel got his training on the job, never went to a design school.' 'When you see this', asks Smith, 'and when you imagine that this was built in the 1800s, you have to think to yourself, "What are our designers building today? Where are they going that is as far in the future as this bridge was when it was built?"'

The car speeds downhill into Bower Ashton, site of the purpose-built faculty for art and design at the West of England College of Art, opened in 1965. Garland sets Smith's expectations, 'The guy who runs this course, Norman Potter, has got some rather special ideas about education. I think we'll find this as something out of the ordinary.'

Apparently directed by Potter, the pair enter the building not through the main reception but by a stepladder that they find propped up to the window of a workshop. Smith jokes about this unorthodox entrance — 'What! Up and through a window?' — but it goes by without explanation. Inside, she and Garland climb down from the window ledge, walk through a studio of drawing boards and emerge into the open hall at the centre of the department. A second male voice begins to speak, on the voiceover: 'To me ... the enemy is paper-shuffling, and key-jangling. People who have emotional capital wrapped up in the business of closing doors rather than opening them.' I recognise the voice, and the metaphors, as Potter's.

As he speaks, we see a small group of mostly female students around a workbench, cutting and working with timber. The images synchronise with the voice and Potter appears. I have been researching his work for several



Ken Garland and Lil Smith enter workshops at the West of England College of Art, Bristol. Still from *Art — To A Degree*, directed by Philip Donnellan, 1976.

years, yet this is the first time I have seen him on film. He is seated, his head and torso tightly framed by the camera. His animation is composed; he looks hunched and solid. His body language positions the interviewers in the room. Smith is apparently seated to Potter's right. He twice turns to address her directly as he talks about the 'shop floor':

> There's a hell of a lot of difference between appointing a representative to go into a committee, for God's sake, and actually having a real-life situation — as *you* would know — on the shop floor that is making some sense. ... People are actually involved with controlling their own lives and making their own education. We have always seen this as our task, not to educate people, but to provide an environment, including the facilities that are necessary technically, in which people can effectively educate themselves.

Cut to a close-up image of a pad of writing paper on a workbench. In black ink, Garland begins to diagram the history of art and design education in the UK:

> Today, Lil, there are about ten thousand art and design students all over the country. Bristol is just one of a whole lot of centres. Let's see how things have developed. Starting with 1853. This is when the government set up a teaching and exam programme in the new schools of design that had sprung up in the enthusiasm of the Great Exhibition of 1851. In 1913, they instituted a drawing certificate, which held sway for a very long time. 1946, in fact, was the next development. We have a National Diploma in Design, 'NDD' for short. This is a thing I went through. Rather a gruelling affair, lots of exams, you had to do a certain thing at a certain time while somebody watched you. All rather unpleasant, none of us liked it very much.

Garland proceeds down the page, representing his chronology with a column of boxes into which he enters important dates and events. At the bottom of the page, he splits the column into two diverging paths:

> An outfit called the Coldstream Committee produced a report in 1960 suggesting a new approach. They proposed a Diploma in Art and Design — DipAD — which didn't have this exam structure, it was a rather freer structure and relied more on displays of work and portfolio demonstration, things like that. This was accepted and, in 1963, out of eighty-seven colleges of art and design that applied for the new diploma, only twenty-nine were approved. The rest — the fifty-eight who were rejected — had to go off and do their own thing somewhere.

The narrative is familiar to me — Potter wrote about it in *What is a designer*, a book on design (not only) for students, published in 1969. The DipAD split, and the long-running tensions between 'provincial' education and what was offered in the London schools, produced the opportunity that first brought Potter to Bristol. The West of England College of Art had failed to win

accreditation for a DipAD programme and so, in 1963, Potter, then teaching at the Royal College of Art in London, was recruited to assemble a staff and establish a new course, initially as a vocational offering, with the hope that it would achieve accreditation for DipAD the following year. His proposition was to unite the existing interior design and furniture design courses with graphics as a single programme called 'Construction'. Potter brought with him colleagues from the RCA, including George Phillip, Robin Baker and Jim Wood. Richard Hollis was appointed to lead the graphics work. Some members of the old Bristol administration remained, their sceptical presence foreshadowing problems ahead. The first prospectus from the new course, a modest document typed on off-white foolscap, no images, set out a few critical formulations that Potter would later develop in *What is a designer*:

> Design is a field of concern, response, and enquiry as much as decision and consequence: to a known and defined sense of situation the student must bring an awareness of his position, a constant search for a place of value in a world of facts, and a full command of the tools and techniques with which he can validate his intuitions.[2]

Donnellan's overview does not have time to make this explicit, but, far from resolving the West of England College of Art's difficulties, almost from the outset Potter's course produced a new conflict with the National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design, the governing body set up to administer the DipAD system. The main point of contention was the name 'Construction' and the integrated approach it implied. The word 'interdisciplinary' is not much used in Potter's writing; I suppose he would have thought it an aggrandisement. His often-repeated maxim 'all designers are graphic designers' suggests a more everyday appreciation of the fact that many design processes have essential features in common — surveying the situation, writing and communication, graphic production (either as an output itself, or as a specification for further manufacture) and model-making. But the DipAD structure emphasised specialisation: furniture, interiors and graphics were recognised separately. Difficulties seemed inevitably to follow, and in 1966 accreditation was refused. The new course was in crisis already.

'The undersigned architects, designers, and others, express confidence in the Construction course at Bristol, endorse the professional relevance of its terms of reference, and would like to see the experiment receive positive support.' So begins the petition produced by Potter in reaction.[3] 'It is hardly possible for a degree-level course to vindicate its worth with a restricted student intake, and in an atmosphere of continuous preparation for annual re-assessments. We therefore urge the National Council to take a generous view of this matter in the spirit of the Coldstream recommendations; to rescind its refusal of recognition for DipAD interior design; and to give such recognition, whether provisional or not, for long enough to allow the course to show its potential.'

The conventional 'interior design' had apparently been adopted as a compromise. The petition was signed by a roster of celebrated designers nationally and internationally, including James Stirling, Aldo van Eyck, Edward Wright and Cedric Price. (And also Ken Garland.)

What is hard to reconcile now, from the documents I have seen, is the impression that, aside from tensions about naming and disciplinary boundaries, Potter's programme seemed in accord with the essential directives of the new national system. In 1960, Coldstream had criticised provincial schools for a lack of rigour. In response, Potter's programme was sophisticated and various, and, as anyone familiar with his writing would expect, it thoroughly synthesised literary and philosophical perspectives with practice and technical rigour. The lecture programme in 1964 included notable international designers and critics such as Paul Schuitema, Walter Segal and Kenneth Frampton, and titles such as 'Microscopic identification of timber', 'Origins of the modern movement' and 'The diagram as an analytic tool'. Potter himself struggled to explain their failure:

> We had a first-class and highly motivated staff, a most promising and enthusiastic first group of students, a brand new building, excellent technical facilities, and a most detailed academic programme and case in support, the substance of which has never been challenged to this day. All we wanted was permission to proceed. When it was withheld, I stormed about in London trying to find someone who would debate the issues with me... The only person who was helpful was Robin Darwin, who revealed the cabinet secrets (I cannot repeat them).[4]

Back to Garland's diagram, its path now split decisively in two. 'In 1968, there were ructions. We have the Hornsey/Guildford sit-ins...' The prosaic pacing of Donnellan's film is suddenly interrupted, cutting to a noisy, graphic montage in black and white. The footage is from Patricia Holland's 1970 film documenting the six-week occupation of Hornsey College of Art by students and staff. A female student is shown on the telephone in an improvised office. 'We are in authority. We have taken control of the college!' We see images of large groups of students and staff gathered in the college's main hall, debating. The sit-in attracted significant media attention for its longevity and for the constructive nature of its protest, which took the form of exhaustive discussions, and the formulation and publication of proposals for the reform of the college.

Potter reappears on the voiceover:

> I think the Hornsey students had a very rough time out of it. They suffered very greatly for being projected into the possibility of a marvellous dream that couldn't be sustained. ... I don't think myself that intellectually anything very substantial came out of it. I don't think it was that kind of thing. But it certainly brought forward, into conscious debate, whole numbers of issues of student participation in the way that courses are run, student representation and so on.

This statement hardly betrays the fact that these were painful events for him, which ultimately brought his 'Bristol experiment' to a premature end. Students at Bristol also protested in 1968, and an 'information room' was set up in the Construction department to document events and statements of protest nationally and internationally. Potter left Bristol soon afterwards,

under threat of legal action from the college for his role in the protests. Some notes for a lecture from 1969 give a more emotionally charged picture of his experiences at Hornsey:

> I cannot describe to you how my whole heart reached out to the potential of this situation... There are some experiences to which, to know them, their truth or falsity, you must expose all your faculties. I shall not forget driving past the building the night the lights went out and the physical hurt I felt, the sense of outrage.[5]

Leaving Bristol, Garland and Smith continue their tour to Dundee, Bradford, Leeds, Birmingham and Middlesex. They find markedly different perspectives on recent history. At Dundee, an emphasis on traditional craft skills prevails. During a life drawing class, Smith asks a senior tutor if he thinks art education is going in the right direction. The pointed answer is 'no'. He thinks it's becoming too much about talking, not enough doing. In Bradford, a play performed by students echoes this sentiment. The performers revel in lines of dialogue mocking the professionalisation of art education: 'They may not be able to sing or dance very well, but they'll certainly be able to talk incomprehensibly about singing and dancing!' In Leeds, the camera captures looks of confusion and indifference on the faces of passers-by as a group of art students performs in the street. Smith and Garland are shown in a local pub with the performers afterwards, discussing what value for money public art represents for taxpayers. In Birmingham and Middlesex, these perspectives are countered by interviews with students on product and fashion design courses. 'Industry' is a pressing concern. Students are anxious about how they will find work after their studies. Smith, embodying the social conscience of Donnellan's film, asks a fashion student if she realises what her education will ultimately have cost the taxpayer and if her employment prospects could possibly justify it.

Their journey complete, Garland and Smith are walking, in reflective conversation, on a canal towpath beneath a network of sweeping flyovers. They are talking about what they have seen and speculating about the future. The tone is confused and doubtful. Smith feels overwhelmed by the disparities. Garland worries, conversely, that the most interesting work, at the edges, is being lost as courses are regulated and institutionalised. The camera pans away from them, through 180 degrees, and I think I recognise where they are: back in Birmingham, at the Gravelly Interchange, colloquially known as 'Spaghetti Junction'.

A week later I am there, a mile from my studio, looking to confirm if I've correctly identified the place. Spaghetti Junction is a central hub of England's transport network: the convergence of the M6 motorway — connecting London and the North — with arterial roads around the Midlands, built over the top of the existing junction of the Grand Union, Birmingham-Fazeley and Tame Valley canals, and the confluence of the Tame and Rea rivers. Opened in 1972, it remains as defining an icon of the industrial culture of its time as Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge. The two images bookend Donnellan's film. He takes us from a monumental, singular structure to a sprawling, convoluted network, the metaphorical labyrinth that the film's announcer promised.



Aerial photograph of 'Spaghetti Junction', circa 1972.
Original source unknown.

The place is not knowable on foot. It takes an hour of walking indirectly to find the position of the panning shot in the film. In the intervening years, trees have covered the banks and additional supports have been installed to accommodate the massive volume of traffic passing above. Standing beneath the junction, the vantage is incomplete. Unlike Brunel's bridge, which is an awesome spectacle from the valley in Bristol, Spaghetti Junction — as an image — can only be appreciated from behind the wheel of a moving car, sweeping over and under, or from a great height. Aerial photographs show its knotted vectors as they must have looked to its designers: a dizzying problem-solving exercise. Paths loop across each other, entering the fray, disappearing from view, then re-emerging on some unlikely trajectory. Back at the studio, I find a proud image of the junction at its opening — empty of cars — in a photographic history of Birmingham. I scan it, print it and pin it to the wall.

A family of students

Looking at this labyrinthine image, I am reminded of something. It is two years prior and I am in the French countryside, searching for an address. Following directions noted down over the telephone, I have difficulty finding it. I seem to be in the right place, but there is no apparent entry point. A thirty-foot wall of vigorously overgrown trees and thorny bushes obscures any view of the building within. To the side, the unhinged door of a small outbuilding facing the road is secured with a coiled bicycle lock. I peer inside, through a small window, and see piles of unopened post and a rusty scooter. Further around the side of the plot is a steep bank, and signs of a path through the tangle of green, soon to be overgrown again.

This small house, in the Charente region, was previously owned by Potter. He spent some of his later life in rural France and this was the last of a number of small properties he bought to renovate. He died in 1995 and the inertia of French inheritance law has left the house almost untouched for the intervening twenty years. Potter's family have recently been here to recover significant personal belongings, original papers, books and other things they thought relevant to Potter's archive. I am visiting at their invitation.

The house itself is in a state of irreversible decay. Its ceramic bricks are crumbling; rot is consuming its roof timbers. The roof at the back is partially collapsed. Inside, three tight spaces are lined by stacks of building materials and belongings spilling out of decomposing cardboard boxes. I find plastic bags containing books, damp and rotting. There is a rack for tools and fixings and, leaning against walls and clamped to beams, some simple material exercises. Hooks, handles and switches embedded in lengths of timber — preparations for Potter's planned renovation of the property. After a couple of hours poking around, I collect up the bags of books and take them to the cottage that I am renting a couple of miles away. I lay them on the stone floor in front of the fire to dry out. Amongst others, there are copies of A. N. Whitehead's *The Aims of Education*, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, John Holt's *How Children Fail* and Everett Reimer's *School is Dead*, all in 1970s paperback editions with bright graphic covers.

One bag also contains a pile of photocopied papers bound together by damp. By the fire overnight, the sheets turn soft and powdery and can be

gently prised apart. There are ninety-two A3 photocopies, each reproducing a double page opening from what appears to be a book dedicated to labyrinths. No cover or title page is present to identify the book. Back at the studio, some weeks later, speculative research suggests a few possible titles, and I ultimately find a used copy of *Mazes and Labyrinths of the World* by Janet Bord, published in 1976. The book was printed in colour, but Potter's photocopies render its photographs, drawings and stone rubbings coarsely in black and white. Some pages show vast landscaped labyrinths and mazes, others symbolic representations of labyrinthine forms found on coins and tablets. Potter's books and papers are typically not annotated, and these sheets have no handwritten marks. The deterioration of the paper, though, has produced strange marginalia to the printed images. The wet paper had been infused with patches of mould. Some areas have soft, soaked expanses of colour, like washes of sepia ink, densely spotted with darker spores. The dankest sheets are painterly fields of blotchy growth, now irritating to the nose. These are marked with linear pathways projecting outwards from central nodes, intricate organic relatives of the graphic forms printed on the pages.

One labyrinth design is familiar. On page 27 of Bord's book is a constellation of dense spiral forms, a network of chambers and other isolated graphic forms resembling trees and arcs. The caption identifies the markings as ancient rock engravings found in Mogor, Spain. I recognise the design from *Models & Constructs*, the monograph on and by Potter, published by Hyphen Press in London in 1990. There it appears as a full-page monotone image, roughly enlarged so that its edges harden like crenellations. It is placed with a selection of Potter's poetry, prefacing the prose poem 'Daedalus, An act of creation'.

Potter began to write poetry seriously after 1968 and the labyrinth was an image that preoccupied him. The Cretan labyrinth and the Greek myth of Icarus are appropriated as the settings for his series of poems titled *In:quest of Icarus*, first published in 1975 and revisited frequently for the next two decades. The versions of these poems that appear in *Models & Constructs* are dramatically altered from their original publication as a handout given to the audience at the only performance of the poems during Potter's life. This took place at Bristol in December 1975 — shortly after Potter returned to the school for a second spell as its head — and took the form of a staged reading given by students and colleagues. In these poems, the mythological Minotaur is an incidental presence. The labyrinth itself is the threat, a metaphor for the prototypical institution, the oppressor of the spirit of youth that Potter identifies with the naïve energetics of Icarus. *In:quest of Icarus* is his portrait of the corruptibility of students. I take its language — at once tender and resentful — to be indicative of his state of mind in the period following his departure from Bristol in 1969, deeply dissatisfied with his experiences there, and at Hornsey. The work is dedicated to the international student movement.

In:quest of Icarus is not as exceptional as it may seem in Potter's output as a designer and educator. While it is his only body of published poetry, it reflects intimately on his experiences as an educator, and is itself highly designed, proposing a union of script and stage that Potter intended as an isomorphic relation of the constraining corridors of the labyrinth to the



Section of one of Norman Potter's photocopies from *Mazes and Labyrinths of the World*, by Janet Bord.

mechanisms of the typewriter on which the poems were written. The set was built by the student performers during the public rehearsal period. Immediately following the work's original performance, Potter led a seminar on the connections between poetry and design. A cassette recording of these proceedings still exists. During some opening remarks, Potter addresses what he presumably anticipated would be a confused response to his combination of these two activities:

> For years I had a block against poetry. Word poetry, that is. I chose to work as a craftsman and designer with my own workshop. How did I feel about it then? To write seemed not to do. To be somehow supplementary to what was done or, in that sense acted out. I felt that the act of making something was to have immediacy and concreteness. That it was treason to follow and to be wise after the event, to comment upon experience in the way that poetry seemed to me to do. ... Once you see that poetry is not something you do in church, or try to avoid doing in school, but is, in fact, the intensification of ordinary speech, and an effort to use words as tools to extend our humanity, then the barrier — we might say the wall — is breached.[6]

Earlier in 1975, Potter had been persuaded to return to Bristol after six years away. In his absence, the course had faltered, partly reverting to its previous administration, sinking into inertia without spirited leadership. Potter made his return conditional on the institution's acceptance of a radical reorganisation of the course. He proposed a new pedagogical model, its spatial plan borrowed from another classical archetype, the Roman arena:

> The structure is now replaced by four family groups, made up by first-, second-, and third-year students, with independent teaching methods, working environment, and course objectives, under the autonomous direction of the four full-time academic tutors in the school. ... The four groups relate to a central area called the Arena. Here all students meet in certain common projects, for specialised lectures or seminars, for extra-curricular activities which the Arena is concerned to foster, and for the exhibition of work from all four groups, whether for project criticism or for exhibitions of longer duration. In some of these respects the Arena is an area of critical disputation, in which work is examined by objective criteria, and if necessary, harshly; as distinct from the more subjectively orientated working ambience of the family groups. The Arena has no power to over-rule the academic autonomy of individual groups, but will freely criticise their positions, i.e. their assumptions and objectives, as much as their apparent performance.[7]

Potter's proposal combines the self-organised teaching forms that flourished during the Hornsey sit-in with an 'area of critical disputation' that he describes with a hint of menace. That Potter should adopt the spatial metaphor of the arena is telling. In the order of Roman public spaces, the forum was the general meeting place and the stage for political discussion and demonstration. The arena had more spectacular functions. Gladiatorial

contests took place there, and theatre and performance — all troubling connotations to students for whom criticism was an intimidating prospect.

A single student

In June 2013, I met four former students — all male — from the first intake to the Construction course in 1964. Our meeting was an informal reunion for this group of friends, in the extraordinary home designed and self-built by one of the former students, Mike Harvey, in the St Weburghs area of Bristol. My notes remind me that in preparing for this meeting I had wanted to ask about one-to-one access to Potter, to understand how present he was in the everyday life of the school in that initial phase. The response that one of the group gave to this question left me with a mental image that, as I recall it now, conflates with the tightly framed, up-close image of Potter from Donnellan's film:

> There was a general office which had a library, and the secretary. Behind that was this dingy basement with a tiny skylight. He was there. He had this little office. He would chain-smoke Senior Service cigarettes. You walked in and you immediately had secondary cancer. He did a lot of one-to-one tutorials in that space. These were ... well, I found them quite gruelling. He usually gave me the third degree on anything I'd done. He would be hunched over, with a fag in his hand. If he didn't like what you were doing, a lot of growling noises would come out of him. Mhhrmmmr. Mhhhrrgghm. Then he'd draw some little diagram, just to show you how your idea could be sorted out. You could spend hours talking, if you wanted to. I would go over to his house at midnight sometimes, knock on the door, he would be awake. We'd just sit around having coffee and talking until three, four, five in the morning.[8]

I have encountered Potter's preference for tight spaces before, but this smoke-filled example seems particularly evocative of its era. But most telling is the association of this space with the late-night meetings in Potter's home, the suggestion that the conversation wasn't defined by the school building or its timetable.

Two archival boxes containing some of Potter's papers are temporarily residing at my studio. They have been in the care of his publisher since the production of *Models & Constructs* in the late 1980s. I recently brought them here for cataloguing, before they are reunited with a larger archive retrieved from France by Potter's family, which is presently in storage in London. Some of the material is divided into folders corresponding to the sections of *Models & Constructs*. There are autobiographical materials and correspondence, photographs and technical illustrations from projects produced in Potter's workshop, and poetry. Other folders contain documents related to the Construction course. One card binder has typed copies of the first year's teaching programme: dates and listings for lectures, and what seems to be a complete set of numbered project briefs. Another has copies of staff memos and student reports.

I am spending a day reading and making digital scans of these documents. At the computer, I label the scans and organise them for future

reference. Beginning with the correspondence, I read a typed copy of a memo distributed by Potter to 'Members of academic staff in Bristol'. It is undated, but probably from January 1969, shortly before Potter's first departure from the college. In the upper right corner of the page, in Potter's handwriting, is the note: 'The legal game: move one on the board.' The memo reproduces a letter received by Potter — retyped, not photocopied — from a legal firm, Adams, Brown & Co.:

> We have been acting for the University of Bristol in connection with legal proceedings which have been brought against certain persons who were concerned in the recent occupation of the Senate House building. Our attention has been drawn to a Broad Sheet which was issued during the 'sit-in' under your name, which indicated that you were a supporter of the 'sit-in' and seems to suggest that you may have been one of the people who was actually involved in the unlawful occupation of the building. We feel it only fair to warn you that the University would consider commencing legal proceedings against you if it transpires that you did, in fact, trespass in the Senate House building.[9]

The second page of Potter's memo relays his response to Adams, Brown & Co.:

> I personally attended four such discussions, together with many members of staff from the Bristol Colleges (including the University). I did so for the obvious reason that my students were there; students whose judgement I have cause to respect, and for whose education I have a continuing responsibility under all circumstances. It is difficult, indeed absurd, to interpret this action as 'trespass' in any good sense at all. ... It is regrettable that those who deplored the students' conduct failed, as it seems, to exercise their own educational responsibility; first, by failing to conceive an imaginative and realistic educational structure in which such happenings would be unnecessary, and second, by failing, in the event of the sit-in, to argue coherently their case against it. To my mind, a teacher opts out of education if he fails to join with his students at crucial times in their academic life, whether or not he decides to support, or reasonably to oppose their conduct, by persuasion of its wrongfulness. I am not aware of a more basic principle on which to structure the pursuit of further education.[10]

There is nothing further from this correspondence in the material I have, and no copy of the broadsheet. Apparently legal action was not pursued, but I suppose Potter's motivation for distributing the memo was to display conviction to others who may have been present at the sit-in and received similar threats. The commitment is unflinching and the tone combative. As I work at the scanner, I rehearse an argument, clarified by revisiting the story of the dingy basement office and reading this memo. In my notes, I write, 'In Potter's writing for (and about) education there is a disregard for the institution and its implied boundaries: between personal and professional, between student and teacher.'

In the second archive box, the heroic rhetoric of this note is abruptly undermined. I find the contents of a folder with typed copies of sixty-six student reports, all from Potter's second phase at the school. Written directly to students, their tone is typically critical, anecdotal and generally encouraging. Until, about halfway down the stack, I find an extraordinary example. This report, from 1977, has six pages. The first two are administrative forms stating that the student is failing the course. The remaining four sheets resemble a letter more than a report. It begins:

> ...you must not go winey on me (or yourself) and pretend to be less intelligent than you are. If I were to say that your 'report' and the back-up of your portfolio, exhibit attitudes that are lazy, ignorant, bigoted, and selfish, and that you appear to be living in a soft-headed middle-class dream; you would probably burn with outrage and the injustice of it, and you would be right, and so would I be right, because your whole situation is in some sense an injustice to you; it is not, that is to say, sufficiently and usefully true to everything that you are, could be, and probably need to be; and someone has to say so at this point in time and it has to be me.[11]

These lines shock me, as clearly they were meant to shock the student. To describe them as offensive is redundant — the letter openly declares its intention to be taken this way, to outrage. This is compounded by the context: an on-the-record, formal communication that seems to acknowledge no responsibility to assume the depersonalised voice of the institution. The force of the criticism immediately confronts me with questions that I have never asked about Potter and the teaching culture that he produced.

I continue to read:

> If you cannot accept that the world makes demands on you and that these demands are inescapable, you should simply get married and be sheltered by money or God knows what for the rest of your life.

The letter was written to a female student. Reading it today, this sentence can only be interpreted as conforming to an abusive, patriarchal culture. I struggle to reconcile its exercise of male intellectual privilege with the image of Potter protesting with his students, and the letter he wrote in their defence that I handled only an hour earlier. The context — the student's situation and disposition — is unknowable to me in this moment, but my own investment in studying Potter as a teacher compels me to perceive a distinction between the cruelty and candour exhibited here.

Having taught in design schools, I think I recognise the dynamic that Potter seems so antagonised by. There exists in design education the possibility to simplify critical exchanges with underachieving students by offering non-committal commentary that permits the student to continue in a particular direction without confronting what, in the fullest sense, their work might lack. This practice is sometimes justified amongst educators with the excuse that work ought to 'deserve' criticism — that if it is below a certain level of sophistication or intensity, there is no point subjecting student work

to rigorous scrutiny. When he writes 'someone has to say so at this point in time, and it has to be me', I read Potter categorically refusing to take such an easy way out.

There is a sense, then, in which this candour might be constructive. Potter assumes a responsibility to be direct, to not allow the student to simply withdraw from criticism by failing the course. Momentarily, this interpretation feels believable. But the criticism continues, unrelentingly, over two thousand words:

> Of course the subjective experience of an education, particularly a self-education, is the heart of it, or the heart of the organic growth of understanding that an education is. Theorists of education, from Socrates to John Dewey, and field workers of which I am one, have urged this view along with many of its implications, and many of us in further education have battled for years to fight-off the counter claims of specialised training and more particularly, the spurious attention given to short-term results in education, to success criteria related solely to career prospects, and to every other sort of educational window-dressing.
>
> This is not at all what we are on about in asking for 'evidence of study'. The point is that this is the minimum that can relevantly be asked of you, to guarantee your own freedom of manoeuvre within the social facts that we must all live with. If you say of this 'it's not what you're doing that counts at all but your ability to write about it at some later date' this is such a crass misunderstanding and evasion of what is involved I can only assume that you are really talking about something else, some emotional problem in yourself; unless you simply do not realise that a creative challenge is here implied, on the one hand, and the first condition of freedom (the recognition of necessity) on the other.

By this point, the writing has become essayistic. I recall other occasions, when reading a report or staff memo written by Potter, that I have recognised fragments of prose from *What is a designer*. The process of writing to students was evidently productive for him, and that perhaps partly explains the length and range of this letter. These paragraphs I take as a response to the anti-academic sentiments expressed by the student performers in Donnellan's film (and presumably by the student in question here): 'They may not be able to sing or dance very well, but they'll certainly be able to talk incomprehensibly about singing and dancing!' The objection was that the DipAD — by 1976 in operation for almost a decade at Bristol — was too much about writing and critical reflection. On this point, Potter proceeds forcefully:

> This is a BA course and as far as I am concerned standards are involved. If you want to argue a case about education, I expect you to do your homework — as I have had to do — and I expect you to have sat up all night and several nights so that you actually know your Bantock and Peters and Holt and Illich and Reimer and Goodman and all the rest so that we can take all that for granted as common ground before we begin. And this applies to any other matter on which you are forming

> views. There is no point whatever in exchanging opinions at the level of a women's institute tea-party; if you want to be taken seriously as a degree level student — and may I say ... I would not go to the trouble of writing you this long letter unless I respected you and took you seriously.

The dismissively phrased suggestion that to be taken seriously a female student must have read a list of canonical male authors finally exhausts my motivation to reconcile this letter with my admiration of Potter's candour as a teacher.

The letter concludes:

> I think you should ask yourself a whole lot of questions including just what you are doing here; but also, what is blocking you and (apparently) clouding you. The message of your portfolio appears to be 'I hate to give' and the message of your report 'I live and love to take into myself, stop asking me to justify myself or to give you anything'. If this is so in any degree at all, then you ought, I think to take a radical view of your whole life situation and all I can do, helpfully, is to put up various mirrors around you. The nature and extent of the distortion in those mirrors, is for you to determine.

The mirrored enclosure completes this collection of spatial metaphors found in Potter's career as an educator: beginning with the unknowable labyrinth, proceeding through the publicly contested arena to arrive at this claustrophobic space. As a series, from the perspective of the student, they seem increasingly unforgiving.

In 1977, Potter finally left Bristol. His letter of resignation is amongst the documents I am scanning. In it, he wrote:

> In leaving, I am not particularly pleased with myself any more than many of the things and attitudes I see around me. On the other hand, education can become a bland pretence that all is right with the world, except just the little problem of apathy around the place, when religion, philosophy, art and design have been in a turmoil of crisis and despair about the meaning and direction of life, not to mention either the concentration camps of the near past, the apparently overwhelming survival problem for mankind, and the ominously growing world-wide use of torture as a normal feature of political life. One must see an education — however specific to nuts and bolts — in the full context of the culture that supports it, and to whose change it seeks to contribute. In 1977, a student who wants a cosy time wants to remain a child.[12]

One thing seems clearer, and important, in the presence of these documents. I think back to Garland and Smith climbing through the studio window at Bower Ashton. The meaning of Potter's staging device now appears plain: it was a subversion of the institutional pretence that there exists a threshold between education and life.

I return to the long student report to scan it. Its sheets are held together with a metal clip that has rusted and bound itself to the surface of the paper,

making scanning difficult. I consider whether to remove the clip, probably tearing the corner of the paper but enabling a visually clearer scan, or to leave it intact and accept that the sheets will fan out beyond the edge of the scan in a distracting way. I opt for the former. I collect the scans of all of these documents in a folder and name it 'give everything expect everything'.

Images accompanying this essay are reproduced courtesy of Sally Potter and Charlotte Potter for the Norman Potter Archive.

1 *Art — To a Degree*, produced by Philip Donnellan, featuring Humphrey Burton, Lil Smith and Ken Garland, from the 'Omnibus' series (London: BBC, 1976), 55 min.
2 West of England College of Art, 'School of Design prospectus' (Bristol: West of England College of Art, 1964).
3 Typed copy of a petition addressed to The National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design, originating at West of England College of Art, June 1966, from the Norman Potter Archive.
4 Norman Potter, undated correspondence to 'David', from the Norman Potter Archive.
5 Norman Potter, 'box and fox: a personal comment on design and teaching', unpublished typed notes for a lecture given at the Royal College of Art, London, 27 November 1968, from the Norman Potter Archive.
6 Recording of a seminar given following the performance of *In:quest of Icarus*, undated, from the Norman Potter Archive, transcribed from cassette tape by the author.
7 Norman Potter, undated typed document titled 'Changes in academic structure and content', from the Norman Potter Archive.
8 Interview by the author with a past student of Norman Potter, 30 April 2013.
9 Norman Potter, typed copy of a memo sent to 'Members of academic staff in Bristol', undated, circa 1969, from the Norman Potter Archive.
10 Ibid.
11 Norman Potter, typed copy of a student report, July 1976, from the Norman Potter Archive. The excerpts following on pages 176–178 are also from this source.
12 Norman Potter, letter of resignation from West of England College of Art, 1977, from the Norman Potter Archive.