

Consulting the Genius of the Place

A typical architectural project starts with a brief, and the 'site' is then approached on this basis. The proposal for this studio is to examine – by means of a case study - what might come before and lie beneath the setting of a brief, and how this process can be informed by an understanding of a 'place'. Following a structured exploration of the many dimensions of the place, and the influences acting upon it, students will develop a vision for moulding its future, and outline a process to achieve this.

Although the aim of the studio will be to propose a future direction for the place, it will stand back from making an architectural proposal. Rather, it will investigate the ground on which such a proposal must stand, and the larger processes in which architectural design participates. Differing opinions of stakeholders, questions of value, and ethical issues will be considered.

It is recognised that this is a challenging project to undertake in 5 weeks with Year 1 & 2 students. The emphasis will be on mapping out the territory, and gaining a taste of the reality of a live case.

The proposed case study is Ruperra Castle and Park, 8 miles north of Cardiff (see attached sheet for more details). This is an intriguing and provocative place. Alongside the obvious questions of what might be done with its abandoned buildings, there are significant historic, cultural, landscape, political and ecological issues to be addressed. Ruperra's future direction is a 'live' issue, and it would give students the chance to engage with a range of protagonists and interests, and to participate in a real debate.

Process Activities/tasks to include:

- Research and place study - site visits, site survey, individual research, analysis and presentation;
- Presentations on aspects of the place and the processes that affect it – eg. history, ecology, political framework, community interests, economic issues;
- Discussion workshops, focussed on the process of developing a response – eg. understanding and balancing issues - the planning system - economic pressures - is consensus possible?
- Synthesis of place study into a response – a vision and outline plan of action;
- Final workshop/debate at which students' action plans could be presented, reviewed and discussed. Invitees would include a range of stakeholders: owner, politician, officials (eg. CADW and/or Caerphilly) , 'expert' (eg. on Conservation), community activist, unaffiliated local resident/walker.

Survey The study of the place will range over a wide spectrum, to include:

- Landform; geology; climate; hydrology; size; ecology;
- Buildings; designed landscape; infrastructure; archaeology;
- Ownership; legal status; political issues; stakeholders;
- Economic issues; management; access; yields; uses and activities;
- History; artistic, architectural, cultural qualities; cultural and/or spiritual significance;
- Spatial qualities; scale; character and 'feel';
- Community and individual interests; meanings, memories and associations;
- Conflicts and 'problems'; dynamics and changes; potential.

Presentation At the end of the project, students will be expected to present:

- The results of their survey work, research and analysis – in appropriate media;
- Visions and action plans for the future of the place – the outline of a development or design brief, management plan, conservation plan or other;
- Contributions to a report on the findings of the project, offered as part of the ongoing debate.

Learning Outcomes On completion of the project students should be able to:

- Research, analyse, record, synthesise and present the many facets of a place, to include simple people-based research – interviews, surveys, workshops etc.;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the wide range of uses, ideas and interests that may co-exist in and around a place, and whether there is a need or potential to balance them;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the range of issues that lie behind setting and agreeing a brief;
- Develop a vision for a place as a whole and prepare an outline action plan to achieve it;
- Participate in informed debate on the future of a place.

Ruperra Castle and Park

Rhiw'r perrai – hill of pear trees

Situated approx. 8 miles north of Cardiff, near the village of Draethen. The castle is set in over 300 acres of historic parkland and woodland, commanding extensive views over the Bristol Channel.

This is a rich and complex place which, although apparently largely abandoned and derelict, attracts intense interest and passion. The place is palpably waiting for something to happen but it is not yet clear how the various interests can be balanced and a future path found. It provides a good case study for investigating the complexities of place, and the constraints, opinions and processes that must be negotiated in developing an action plan or brief. What is the place's real potential?

The Castle is '*a unique Jacobean castellated manor house*', left as a ruin since gutted by fire on Pearl Harbour night in 1941. The landscape of the surrounding estate includes farmed parkland, extensive abandoned gardens, numerous estate buildings, and an Iron Age hillfort and woodland owned and managed by a community group.

The castle is owned by a private developer and the adjacent woodland by the community-led Ruperra Conservation Trust. Plans for residential development of the castle and immediate surroundings have attracted significant controversy and debate since 2002, including at a national level. The most recent planning application was turned down in December 2007, and the future of the site remains uncertain.

See also www.ruperra.org.uk for further details and pictures, and a campaigning blog.

Chronology

700 BC-100 AD	Iron Age Hillfort.
c.1100 AD	Norman Motte on hilltop.
1626	Sir Thomas Morgan completed his new house - a Renaissance 'mock castle', unique in Wales - below the hill, possibly on site of an earlier medieval house.
1720, 1764	Plans showing estate, including a two-storey summerhouse on the hilltop.
1785	Destroyed by fire. Rebuilt - Jacobean gables replaced by ornamental battlements.
19 th Century	Lodges, iron bridge, brewhouse, laundry and dairy range built. By the end of the century, the estate is badly in need of repair.
1909	Estate and Castle refurbished by Courtenay Morgan. New porch, stables, power house with steam generators, reservoir and pump house, conservatory.
1935	Put up for sale, but no offers received. Castle abandoned, gardens left to go wild.
1939	Castle requisitioned for war effort.
1941	Castle gutted by fire on Pearl Harbour night.
1956	Estate sold, but castle remained as an empty shell.
1982	South-eastern tower collapsed.
1996	Ruperra Conservation Trust set up.
1998	Castle and outbuildings bought by private developer.
1999	150 acres of woodland - including hillfort site - bought by Trust.
2002	Planning Application to turn castle into 9 flats, refurbish other buildings on the site, and build 15 new houses.
2006	Amended application submitted. 'Save Ruperra Castle' campaign underway.
Feb 2007	Meeting held in Welsh Assembly building to voice concerns.
Dec 2007	Planning Application rejected by Caerphilly County Council.
2008	Owner intends to appeal.

Designations

- Scheduled Ancient Monument Ruperra Castle
- Listed Grade 2* Ruperra Castle
- Listed Grade 2 Outbuildings
- Grade 2 CADW Register of Landscapes, Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales
- Conservation Area Ruperra Castle and Park
- Special Landscape Area Non-statutory designation – CaerphillyCC
- Site of Importance for Nature Conservation Ruperra Woodlands