

# CONWAY + YOUNG

WWW.CONWAYANDYOUNG.COM

## BACKGROUND

Conway + Young are a collaborative design practice based in Leeds whose practice inhabits the intersection between design, education, art and community work. Their work is driven and shaped by the social, political and environmental conditions they live in and they often work with limited means and an inventive resourcefulness. This low-key approach is not motivated by the search for a particular style but by the wish to engage with their local environment and to contribute to the society within which they live.

## AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

Conway + Young's engagement with urban spaces and developments runs through most of the work they produce. It is through walking that they seek access to stories and political questions embedded in the urban fabric of a place. When something attracts their attention, they will produce work in response to it, either as a commission or as their own practice.

Graphic design commissions are a carefully considered part of Conway + Young's practice; the content and mode of production always reflecting their way of thinking about design.

Teaching Graphic Arts and Design at Leeds Metropolitan University currently accompanies their practice. Here, Conway + Young encourage students to produce work not only within the confined walls of the university but to reach out into the city. They often take students out of the university, adopting new learning environments within the city in order to make connections with the wider social geography of their place of study.

'The Unredeemed Pledge' is a residency program for artists and designers that Conway + Young run in their own home. The program started in a cupboard under the stairs in their former Bristol home, where people were invited to stay for two days and one night and to make work in response to their experience. The residency program continues, moving with the designers from house to house.

## FUNDING

Part-time lecturers in Graphic Arts and Design at Leeds Metropolitan University; commissions by art institutions and artists.

## DEVELOPMENT

Working together since 2005

Based in Leeds since 2008

## LOCATION

Leeds, UK, 770,800 inhabitants

## CONVERSATION

This conversation was held at Leeds Metropolitan University in May 2011.

**Bianca Elzenbaumer:** You seem to be a very close collaboration, bound together in your practice by a common belief in the role of designers in society. Could you tell me how your collaboration came about and how your design views have developed over time?

**Jen Conway:** We met at the University of the West of England where we studied Graphic Design. Our collaboration started very informally, we would help each other out with projects and with aspects of our work that we found difficult individually. Because of the university environment we were in and the lack of reference points for this way of working, we didn't really recognise it as 'collaboration'.

**Jessie Young:** Back then, collaboration was not really a word in our vocabulary. We weren't given any examples of collaborative practices and collaborative briefs were rare. We didn't really know what 'a collaboration' was until we went to Rotterdam for an Erasmus exchange program.

**Jen:** So our collaboration was this thing that happened but that was never spoken about or formalised, because it didn't have to be.

**Jessie:** It was actually probably others who recognised before we did that we collaborate unofficially on most things. People like our tutor Colum Leith, who—when we came back from Rotterdam to study our final year of the BA—recognised that our work was particularly interesting when we worked together and encouraged us to continue to work in this way.

**Jen:** During our studies, we spent almost all our time together. We had similar interests, which meant that we not only would be in the same studio at universi-

ty, but that we would also share activities outside the university. We talked a lot about the role of design in society and our collaboration simply developed out of these critical discussions. There was a constant exchange happening between the two of us and the whole thing developed very organically because of the circumstances we were in.

**Jessie:** In our third year, we still did some projects separately. So, when we graduated, we had both separate and collaborative identities as designers. But as soon as we were out of university there was no need for this separation and neither of us cared about ownership. For us, it doesn't matter who completes what part of a project and so we decided to do all of our work together.

We made this decision also partly because of the protection it offered us: in our experience when you first graduate you have a lot of pressure coming from people saying 'do this' or 'do that', 'work in this way', 'live here', 'what are you doing?', but if there is more than one of you, you have a bit of 'strength in numbers' to repel that pressure, to work out—through discussion—what it is you want to do and to encourage each other.

**Jen:** At that time, we started writing quite a lot about the decisions we had made since graduating. We would write these manifestos saying how we would like to work and who we would like to work with. We articulated our thinking by speaking, but we would then also have this piece of print to support what we intended to do, which was really useful.

**Jessie:** In fact, it feels like we have done most of the writing and thinking about our practice since we graduated. During our time in university, we were just making and not reflecting as much. It has been very useful to have this archive of writing about our work.

**Jen:** We would often refer back to it in moments when we weren't sure what we were doing, or when we felt like we were losing perspective. The writing helped us to decide whether a project fitted with what we wanted to do and, having published all these principles, we felt we had to stick by them in order to be coherent.

**Bianca:** **It seems that writing manifestos is something many designers do, but then sticking to these principles is a completely different question. How did you manage to do so without giving in to the pressure put on you both by others, as well as by the simple necessities of life?**

**Jessie:** During the two years after graduation, we got a lot of offers of work which we really should have taken because we could hardly pay our rent, but which we turned down. Instead of taking on projects we didn't believe in, we thought it was better to just take more shifts making sandwiches or work more late nights in a bar. Working together just gave us that motivation and extra confidence to stand by our principles.

**Jen:** Another factor that helped at the time was that we were living very cheaply in Bristol. We would, for example, make our own entertainment in the old shop that we lived in; we used that space as our house, our studio and a gallery space, but also as a place to screen films with our housemate's projector and to have discussion nights, communal meals and short exhibitions. Instead of paying for entertainment, we organised our own.

**Jessie:** We didn't have much extra money to travel to other cities, or for buying books or newspapers, so we set up an artists' residency in our under-stairs cupboard, which allowed us to regularly meet interesting people. We treated our house like it was this big gallery and we produced an identity and publicity for it; we talked about it like it was more than just the front room of our house.

**Jen:** We used the skills we gained in our degree to make the things we did not only more accessible, but also more formal.

**Jessie:** We would produce print pieces that people could pick up outside the front of the house that explained what we were doing. We would also write press releases and invite local councillors to our openings.

**Jen:** This focus allowed us not to be pulled into other things. It gave us reasons to stay in Bristol and motivation to do enough casual work to pay our rent.

After university you lose a structure that allows you to discuss work, to criticise work, and even sometimes the freedom to have strong opinions about what you are doing. Working together, we believe, has allowed us to protect these elements in our work.

As long as we work together, we will always have critical discussions about what we are doing because we don't always agree. We have different backgrounds, we have different opinions, different interests within the subject, but there are also enough similarities that keep us working together. This means that there is this friction between us that allows for a critical reflection about the things we do.

**Bianca:** This sounds like you have been constantly looking for a balance between your creative work and the necessity for covering your more material needs in life. Did you ever get to a moment where that balance was about to collapse?

**Jen:** Before we got permanent positions as lecturers on the BA in Graphic Arts and Design course at Leeds Metropolitan University, we were at a very difficult point. We were doing some teaching in Bristol, but it was not regular enough to rely on. Living that precariously is very stressful and not an easy situation in which to make work.

But we were applying for a lot of jobs and one of those was for the two positions at Leeds Metropolitan University. I think we were quite an unusual appointment in terms of taking us on as an existing collaborative team, and as young and relatively inexperienced lecturers.

**Jessie:** But we were fortunate that they recognised the value of our kind of working and a different type of design experience.

**Jen:** Since we have taken up our teaching position here, our collaboration has developed. We work at Leeds Metropolitan three days a week and this makes our other days for our own practice very precious. We have two days of a working week for our own practice and we have to plan our time very carefully. We probably work much more intensely now than we ever did before. But we are also lucky that we can bring our own practice into our teaching, and vice versa.

**Bianca:** Some of the projects you present on your website are done in collaboration with your students and teaching seems to also give you the financial support for sustaining your personal design projects. How do you feel about the place teaching takes in your practice?

**Jessie:** It's very hard to judge because we started teaching so soon—the September after we graduated, we started to do some teaching as part of a teaching fellowship on the course we had been studying on. So we've never had one without the other; our practice and teaching have both evolved alongside each other and in response to each other.

Even as students, we were interested in pedagogy. In our final year, we would run workshops and project

spaces that were concerned with how people learn. Education has always been something that we investigate as part of our work.

**Jen:** We have always tried to keep an outward-looking approach, constantly thinking of how we could apply things we learned—and now teach—to what is happening outside the four walls of the university.

**Jessie:** Conceptually, teaching allows us to have interesting conversations with students and with staff. Talking three days a week to students is a positive experience. You are asking questions with them and alongside them and you are thinking about things in ways that you couldn't without them. Teaching also gives us the possibility to attend interesting lectures and to invite people in ourselves. This gives us constant stimuli. Through the university, we also find out about things in the city, as universities tend to be involved in things and are always getting informed. Outside the institution, we would find it a lot harder to access this kind of information.

**Jen:** Being part of the university also opened up our discussions: we are now part of a team of staff of 18 people and we have about 350 students. We often have heated debates with other members of staff about what we do—these are almost like crits with our colleagues. This way, we carry on developing our work.

We recognise that we are in a very privileged position. By teaching three days a week, we have two days a week to do our own work. We tend to reinvest money from our lecturing into our own work. It allows us to self-publish things and to choose who we work with. The regular income avoids us making difficult decisions about where we work.

**Bianca:** It is interesting to hear how crucial the support by an institutional structure can be in keeping a critical design practice going. What dynamics are developing between your practice and your involvement with the university?

**Jessie:** Working for a university makes it easier to meet a range of people. Although we are conscious of keeping as much autonomy for our own practice, it is occasionally useful to be associated with a trusted institution. This often speeds up the process of gaining trust when dealing with people in our own work. Before our identity as lecturers is known, however, it is often assumed we are students and this can also work

to our advantage, allowing us more freedom to investigate without professional expectations. It is, therefore, interesting to float between roles and between other people's images of us.

**Jen:** As well as being happy with our association with the University, we want to maintain some autonomy when carrying out our own work. We could be considered double agents, working as Conway + Young but also as lecturers, and often keeping these identities separate.

**Jessie:** At other times our roles combine and complement each other. Our project at Leeds Kirkgate market used a stall (Stall 133-134) as a teaching space and allowed us to make work and to teach within the market.

**Bianca:** **Your practice developed outside London, which seems to be this big centre of attraction for designers all over Europe and beyond. How do you feel about being in Bristol or Leeds versus being in a place like London for advancing your work?**

**Jen:** I have never lived in London and when we finished our BA, we made a conscious decision that we wouldn't go there. This choice between working in 'the periphery' rather than in 'the centre' is something we talk a lot about with our students, because many of them want to go to London as soon as they graduate.

**Jessie:** Almost everyone we knew who graduated with us has moved to London. Initially, we found ourselves under quite a lot of pressure to move to London, but more than anything our decisions have been based on wanting to live in other, less obvious places.

We decided to stay in Bristol and to use the support system we had created while being undergraduates and to make something from that. The longer we managed to do that, the more interesting we found the idea of finding out who else had decided not to go to London, because they couldn't afford it or because it was not even an option. Money was also a consideration for us: living in London would have required a financial support system that we did not have and getting a well-paid, full-time job may have involved sidelining our own practice.

**Jen:** After graduating, we spent 2 years in Bristol, 3 months in Nottingham and have since been in Leeds for 3 years. It has taken us a while to get used to being here and, as a city, Leeds is culturally different to

Bristol. But, for us, it is a great place to be for many reasons: rent is cheap, the area we live in is particularly affordable and the city has a thriving DIY culture, which facilitates our self-initiated practice. The affordability of Leeds allows us to save money and to put it back into the production of projects. And with less financial worry, we feel more able to daydream, mess around and to think about our projects and practice.

**Jessie:** The London experience of people we know has involved working very long hours, commuting and high living costs and we do not see these conditions as supportive of a critical, independent practise.

We strongly believe the work we do is better when we live in the community we make work for and when we give critical ideas time to develop. So commuting or visiting a place to make work is not our ideal way of working.

We prefer to make site-specific work about the places we know, responding to an area or a group of people. It is really important for us that we understand the area that we are responding too. A lot of that comes from walking, using local services, pubs, cafés and hairdressers in order to get a sense of the place we live in.

We are wary of the kind of work some London/metropolitan studios seem to do, projects that involves parachuting into a council estate in a town for a couple of days in a different part of the country and then going back to a studio in an affluent area of London to work on the design that is then implemented in that community. We have strong reservations about how effective or sensitive this type of work is.

**Bianca:** **Besides being rooted in a place and building up strong connections to the community, also the production of 'inclusive' projects seems to be something you feel strongly about. Could you expand on how you go about this in your design practice?**

**Jessie:** We spend a lot of time thinking about how we can be as open as possible, how we can listen, emphasise and encourage dialogue. We also think about how we can share things, experiences and resources. A lot of the time, this just means considering very simple things like invitations or encouragements, printed invitations, verbal invitations, signage and a consideration of the language we use and how we present ideas and situations.

A lot of the workshops we organise happen outside of institutions—for example, the unit we occupied in Kirkgate Market from where we would run crits and

events. We purposefully did not label that space as a Leeds Met teaching space, because the name of a university can be excluding as well as including. In this case, we thought it would be the former.

Without labels or closed doors, members of the public could very easily become part of the sessions we ran with students, so over the period of time we worked there, many different people engaged with the work in some way.

We are keen for people to see that much of the work we do at university is accessible and participatory.

It is important, as designers and as students, to make attempts to understand different types of people and to create opportunities for others to understand you. This is something which is still very much a developing part of our practice—thinking about the different ways in which people communicate (not just verbally) and considering how different contexts affect the way our work is understood.

**Jen:** In terms of our work, nothing we produce is copyrighted—if they wanted to, other people could reuse it—content and design. An example of this happening was when a survey we produced of empty shops in Leeds city centre was used by the organisation ‘Art in Unusual Spaces’. A combination of a photo survey and maps helped them negotiate empty shops for artist projects. That information was also used by Leeds City Council.

A lot of the work we produce is also self-published. This means we have methods of working that other people can adopt. We run workshops outside the university to show people the processes we use that allow us to produce work cheaply and quickly on limited resources. Processes like book-binding, paper folding, stamp making, zine making—really simple techniques that don’t rely on lots of resources.

**Jessie:** I think our work looks a certain way because of the way we work and because of our idea of design. We like that people can look at the work and see how it was made. It’s usually been made very simply and that DIY look is obvious.

We don’t work with vast sums of money and it doesn’t feel right to spend a lot of money on printing or production. We want the focus to be on the content and the people that were involved in the project, not on the printing technique used.

**Jen:** Yes, the aesthetic of our work is based on the economy of space in relation to content. A lot of the

original content gets edited in order for us to work within our means; the result is usually a concise and simple outcome.

**Jessie:** We are very practiced in producing work with hardly any money. We enjoy trying to make something from nothing (or very little). For example, we screen-print with a hand-built vacuum screen-printing bed so that we can print from home, we source paper from scrap stores or samples, that kind of thing.

**Bianca:** **You have built up your own, very specific economic structures to support your design practice. Do you take on interns to share and introduce others to your approach?**

**Jen:** At this point, we have not taken on interns. We have had requests in the past, but, because we don’t have a formal structure to the way we work, we have decided not to take people on. We also wouldn’t feel comfortable with working with someone and not paying them.

**Jessie:** We are not sure if internships are the best way for designers to work out how they want to work. The current intern system within the British design world seems quite unfair and disempowering to students and graduates—that students should be expected to work for little or no money for months at a time to learn about an industry that they are part of. We don’t like the position this leaves financially unstable designers in, or the hierarchical nature of the exchange. More students should be encouraged and supported by universities, colleges and other designers to start their own organisations, to develop independent strategies for learning about industry or to shape their own route.

**Jen:** When we receive requests for internships, we prefer to meet up with them for a discussion about their practice and goals, or invite them to do our residency. This normally develops into a continual and equal relationship based on an exchange of support, interests and recommendations.

**Bianca:** **The way you work is very ingrained in the present and you invest a lot of resources in shaping your surroundings. Are you also considering how your life and your practice might evolve in the future?**

**Jen:** We think a lot about the developments in the fu-

ture. Maybe, in ten years, we won't want to do this anymore. You see this happen to people—they are able to work independently when they are fairly un-tied by mortgages and family, but, past a certain point, it becomes much harder to sustain.

**Jessie:** We dream about living communally; sharing land and working spaces, finding a way to integrate the way we work even better into the way we live.

**Jen:** The main thing seems to be having a supportive community in which to work, surrounding ourselves with other people who want to work in non-standard ways and finding ways to think about the world critically.

**Jessie:** Our recent visit to the community of Arden, Delaware (<http://arden.delaware.gov>) was important; reading about and observing the principles upon which the community was founded was inspiring. Part of our practice is looking for other interesting ways of living and working. We want to continue making work with families and to still be active as very old women, to always be close to other critical artists, designers, writers, musicians, playwrights, sociologists, geographers and so on, because other people are the encouragement and support that keep us going.

[www.conwayandyoung.com](http://www.conwayandyoung.com)

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