The Design as Politics theme for this year is migration, which was the starting point for this project. I took this to mean, in general, 'movement' - rather than migration across countries for economic reasons or from danger zones as refugees. Instead, I decided to focus more on how the daily migration of people affects the spaces in which we live, and how this may negatively impact those places where people migrate in and out on a regular basis.

This led me to choosing my site, Slough, based on a daily migration of people in and out of the town for work, resulting in a daily turnover of inhabitants. This will soon be reinforced with the building of Crossrail - a high speed railway line crossing London, bringing central London much closer. In addition, access to Heathrow Airport will be improved, encouraging migration to further afield. The project, as it stands, combines these two aspects of migration as it links the Slough Trading Estate (where much of the daily migration happens), to Heathrow Airport and thus the world.

My case study is about Slough and Heathrow, and in particular what will happen to Slough if Heathrow is to expand, as planned, with a third runway. As something very unpredictable, the project became about how to create a shock absorber in Slough that could take any changes that might happen at Heathrow, which would greatly affect the town of Slough. The daily migration of people in Slough relies on the presence of Heathrow and the Trading Estate which sits at Slough’s core.

The approach of Design as Politics is generally to focus on research about both the project itself, but also a much wider social context. The parameters set by the studio are incredibly wide, which meant that it took a long time for this project to reach a point from which it could be developed. I undertook research into policy surrounding the Heathrow expansion and what this meant in real terms and political terms, as well as looking at plans for Slough and the area I am focusing on - the Trading Estate. This was an interesting approach as it really began from a much bigger picture, from which I had to distill the project down to something specific to the site, but still with the larger intentions.

In a wider social context, the project is not only a hub for Heathrow and the Trading Estate, but acts as a shock absorber for Slough. In uncertain times, where it is unknown whether the airport will decline or expand, the project aims to use architecture to take the
shock of any eventuality, ultimately fortifying Slough in terms of economy and liveability through strengthening a partnership with Heathrow. In terms of migration, the scheme aims to balance the difference between those who commute into Slough and those who commute out - a difference which is based on education and skills.

Looking back, the research-based approach of the studio meant that it took me some time to work out who my project was intended for. To begin with, my focus on Heathrow and the future of airports took the project down a path which separated the site in the centre of Slough from the town itself, creating a ‘mini-Heathrow’ at its core. This was not really my intention, however, and it took some time to reach a scheme which rather than strengthening Heathrow’s position and creating an economic zone in central Slough, dealt with some of the town’s many social problems, through an architectural intervention. It was important to use Heathrow’s potential as a catalyst for my project, but to make it a mutually beneficial relationship, rather than solely to benefit Heathrow. It was important to see that Slough had the space and opportunities which Heathrow is lacking.

As such, the three intentions of the project are:

1. To make the relationship between Heathrow Airport and Slough town mutually beneficial. 
   Heathrow is a successful business which needs to expand, but which has little space to do so. Slough is a nearby town with an independent economy and its own business park, located on the railway line to Heathrow. As airports will, in future, begin to decentralise (due to changes in systems from physical handling of goods to an internet-based sharing economy), this is a relationship which should be strengthened.

2. To bridge the physical and social gap between Slough and the Trading Estate.
   There is a clear disparity between the level of education of people who live in Slough (low skilled), and those who work in the Trading Estate (high skilled) - a disparity which has been highlighted by Slough council as a problem which needs addressing. The physical zone between the town and the trading estate at its heart is also problematic in urban terms. The project therefore intends to fill this gap with a sensitive architectural solutions which incorporates adult educational facilities.

3. To create something which acts both economically and formally as a magnetic strip across the problematic site, which can absorb changes that happen at Heathrow.
   Whereas currently the site repels any sort of development - it is a sort of ‘no-man’s-land’ - the project aims to bring something of value in both economic and formal terms. It should encourage development around the ring which can absorb any changes in employment, housing or transport which may be triggered by changes at Heathrow.
In order to implement these ambitions, the project had to be able to provide incentives for both Slough and Heathrow, in order for the relationship to be truly mutually beneficial. For the project to be credible, the first step must be to attract Heathrow to the site in Slough, before any development could even begin to take place.

The first step, therefore, is to improve mobility: if movement around the Trading Estate and between the Trading Estate and Heathrow is improved, then links are established and the Trading Estate can begin to become part of Heathrow’s wider operations. Just as businesses benefit from being just outside airport complexes, they will benefit from Slough’s improved links, but with the added benefit of being in a town with proper amenities. In addition, the town will benefit from better mobility around this ring (which incorporates several residential areas) and the direct link to Heathrow and Central London.

Alongside this ring of mobility comes the architectural intervention. It was my intention to place something physical in this void which would be a catalyst for change, as well as an instant improvement in spatial terms. The simple intervention is a brick colonnade which runs around the Trading Estate, creating a human scale buffer zone between the developments within the business park, which are mostly poor in architectural terms. My position is that regardless of how these buildings or future developments behind the wall might look, the colonnade takes the impact and still presents as unified, high quality front to Slough. The use of red brick suggests robustness and is a familiar material in Slough. It has a textural quality which breaks the monotony of such a long structure.

The colonnade, finally, is punctuated with ‘landmark’ buildings which house adult training centres. These not only help to bridge the social gap between the town and the Trading Estate, by educating people from the town in order that they might carry out higher skilled jobs, but also act as landmarks along the colonnade. They are taller than the surrounding buildings, creating some variety along the ring which might otherwise be monotonous, and helping orientation.

As the area develops and employment rises or more housing is needed, smaller amenities or housing can connect to the wall, which can become a residential street or commercial high street, as required. If no development occurs, the wall is simply infrastructure, housing tram stops along the tram line and the ‘landmark’ adult training centres, which have already been identified as a necessity by Slough Council. It was important to allow the colonnade to be flexible, but not too flexible. As such, the wall itself is permanent but it has the capacity for additions and subtractions to be made. If the wall, one day, needs to be dismantled, the bricks can be taken down and reused elsewhere in the surroundings.
The project is also a demonstration of how other business parks might develop to become satellite airport hubs, whilst strengthening the relationship with its surroundings - a condition that rarely occurs in the current climate.

In a wider architectural context, this project’s relevance lies in how it deals with uncertainty, a common problem in architecture today. Having looked at different ways that buildings can be flexible, in terms of use, structure or form, I came to the conclusion that this project, rather than being a fully flexible system which can be dismantled and assembled, instead would be a self-sufficient structural spine, onto which parts can be added as necessary, when necessary. I take the position that although there are several scenarios of what might happen to Heathrow (it might stay the same, expand a little, expand a lot, or even decline), it is the current that is most important. The project is about dealing with problems of the present, while facilitating development in the future. It is a foundation on which later developments can rely, but which fortifies the town as it is.

This project has spent some time in uncertainty itself, partly as a result of this ambition to solve all problems of present and future at once. This is a difficult aspiration, as it is easy to design such flexibility that nothing is defined. In the end, it has been most useful to think about the balance between Slough town and Heathrow, and how this relationship can truly be mutually beneficial. In hindsight, it became clear that the first phase of the project was the most important - from this any development would evolve naturally. What has been most challenging has been deciding how to (or even whether to) define parts which are complete uncertainties. I think the project has reached a balance where enough is defined to allow development, but not too much is defined to hinder what might be ultimately needed in future.