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LIVE PROJECTS: An inspirational model THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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“Through the live project architectural education is once again an inspirational model on which other forms of education may draw.”

Rachel Sara



American Artist Kyong Park's Detroit House, which was rebuilt in Sheffield City Centre by nine students, to highlight the plight of post-industrial cities. The students negotiated with Sheffield City Council for all permissions and Health and Safety approval and re-constructed the house with no drawings or other construction professionals to help.

Introduction

The 'Live Projects' programme at Sheffield, now an established and core part of the MArch (RIBA Part 2) course, is in its seventh year. Live projects happen in other parts of the school - in particular first year where the experience is both parallel and different - but a lot shorter. In the diploma school, students spend the first six weeks of each year (i.e. approx one quarter of their course) working on live projects. This case study is concerned with this experience and the comments and perceptions from the students participating. The live projects involve students working in groups with community, regional or national organisations. The projects have to be 'live' (i.e. a real client with a real problem) and are done in real time, with a defined end result – often a report or presentation to the client group. In many cases the results of the live project have been enacted or else led to further research or consultancy. Live projects reject the separation between real and theoretical, practice and education and allow the student to be creative within constraints. The case study is accompanied by annotated examples of live projects over the past six years.

What is special about the live projects at Sheffield

We have built up a reflective and research led critique of the live projects with various publications and a website [www.liveprojects.org]. Also, a PhD by Rachel Sara in 2004 entitled *Between studio and Street...* examined the role of the live project in Architectural Education. Supervised by Jeremy Till, Rachel's PhD highlights the value in finding a place for learning that is both part of the academy and outside.

Live projects are happening in most schools now, but they vary enormously from place to place. Perhaps what is unique at Sheffield is the extent to which they are student managed and led. The client contact and the management of the project is almost all done by the group participating in the project. Also groundbreaking we believe, is the level of formal skills teaching and support that goes with the live project programme. Student comments support the approach we are taking. They are enthusiastic to learn the core professional skills of team management and communication and are increasingly interested in participatory consultation techniques. Students feel this helps their confidence and ultimately their creativity. We have completed over 50 live projects to date, establishing an enormous archive of fresh ideas and useful work.

In 2002 we set up the Bureau of Design Research (BDR) - a project office and research consultancy, in the School of Architecture. This was primarily as a result of clients wishing to continue with live projects. The BDR now has a portfolio of over 30 completed projects prioritising community visioning and school design. The BDR also archives all the live projects and has a distant mentoring role, as well as participating in the live project programme. We are working on the possibilities for a closer supporting structure to enable live projects to continue throughout the year and to allow individual students to pursue live project interests in their own projects. We are also developing a resource and 'survival pack' for the successful live project.



The live project Website can be accessed at www.liveprojects.org where you can find out more about all the live projects.



A bench and play area was created for Ballifield Primary School, to address playground problems, after a series of consultation events with pupils and staff. The construction took place over a half-term holiday. The girls' toilets were also given a revamp!

Why the live projects are useful and relevant?

Students are very supportive of the live project programme and clearly find them useful and relevant. This year, when asked, the following key reasons were cited:

1. The timing is good, perfect for students just returning from a year or more in practice. There is an interesting balance between practice and education which encourages the student to position themselves politically. They have to re-assess the relationship between client, business and community in the context of the university rather than from an office perspective.
2. There are clear social benefits. They are ideal group projects that are contained time wise and need a group to succeed. They are particularly important for new students who can quickly get to know and work with established Sheffield students.
3. Perception of the projects. Students enjoy working collaboratively and not competitively for a change: this is backed up by research in Rachel's thesis.
4. Students are empowered by the positive feedback from the clients. Institutional and professional clients have commented that they had no idea how strategic students of Architecture can be and what a wide group of skills they have.
5. Students find, in job interviews after they have completed their diploma, that prospective employers are very impressed by the live projects and the output from these. They are also highly regarded by our external examiners.
6. Students enjoy developing their communication skills and see this as a very positive part of the process.
7. Fundamentally it makes the student's architectural education more relevant. The active hands on work is popular – not all like the actual building - as this is hard physical work but a core are really enthusiastic about this and find it enormously rewarding, putting in long hours and developing other carpentry and practical building skills.
8. Finally there are moral and ethical issues in the work, that can not be ignored.

For the School of Architecture and the university generally live projects have enormous benefits. They tell the city and the community what students are up to and what the study of architecture involves; the general public are often completely mystified by what an architect does! They also give something back to the city and the community.

Teaching Approach/Methods

The live projects are logistically quite complex: in particular setting them up and briefing the clients. However, we have found that once they have started they generally generate a momentum, which gets over the short-term problems. It is also easy for the students to waste time at the beginning of the projects whilst meetings are being set up, so direction and support is needed here. Staff at the School of Architecture in Sheffield are now experienced in running these projects.

Tutoring is done in groups and is very much led by the students who use their tutors as consultants and mentors rather than as figures of authority. This is an important revision of normal power relations and leads to a much more committed student group. Tutors are put in a different and sometimes difficult role of stand-in for the client rather than tutor.

From a tutor's point of view the live projects offer many skills that can be gained elsewhere, but core skills of organisation, team working and working to a tight timescale are perhaps some of the key ones. These, we felt, have to be taught like everything else. So the live projects are supported by communication and brief building workshops, attached to the management module, as well as seminars on consultation and creative participatory techniques. Community consultation is a burgeoning profession in its own right; the line we take is firmly that of art and creative practices encouraging a visual, fun and experimental approach.

Students learn about the role of the client - and begin to understand the complexity of the multi-headed client - stakeholder mapping suddenly becomes relevant and is included in a workshop when the teams have all met their clients. Further group work in the workshops also brings out an understanding of what role each individual has in a team. An exercise which is



"This letter is to congratulate you and your team on the amazing quality of their work, and we can not overstate the joy we have had in working with them and the enthusiasm which they have projected towards this project."

David Simons,
The Cavendish Centre for Cancer Care



The Eco Box project in La Chapelle, Paris. Students worked with local residents to develop a community garden and build a mobile library unit.

always positively received is that of the Chinese whispers - illustrating how little we listen and how important positive listening skills are. Three years ago with university funding, we made a film with a professional team, interviewing clients and well-known architects on communicating with each other at various stages of a project. It is a revealing portrait of how architects need to learn to communicate better with non-architectural audiences and forms a back drop to the workshops.

Assessment

The live projects are assessed as group work according to a protocol that we have developed in the Faculty. We have suggested to students that they should, to a degree, be self-assessed, but they have been resistant to this idea because it might destroy the ethos of the projects in terms of collective work and identity. In addition, students reflect on their live projects in their written management studies. We established that the best tool to assess the projects is the presentation of the project at the end – this highlights how well the team have worked together, how successful the briefing process was and how the end result has been communicated back to the client. These are not critiques, but formal presentations run by the student body. Over the years there have been some fantastic presentations, well timed and professional. Again students are given pointers on good presentation techniques. However, all the pitfalls that architects fall into – being over complex with their visual imagery, talking to the screen etc. still occur!

We have variously tried to link the assessment of the live projects to a management module of the MArch course rather than the portfolio studio work, but have not found the perfect solution to date. We need to be able to provide formative assessment throughout the different stages of the project as well as at the final presentation stage - but then it is possible for tutors to fall back on the traditional, architectural assessment process.

Students perceive that there is a diminished focus on the critique, but sometimes tutors are seen to bring more traditional power relationships back in the review. This is seen as very negative and is really the only part of the whole live project process that has been criticised: so



At Sharrard Road Allotments, students worked with school children and parents to construct a resource centre and outdoor classroom for the adjacent primary school. The building is used by the school on Wednesdays when children work on their allotment.

this is under review. We have had comments from students that occasionally tutors are trying to look clever and how irrelevant this is to the process here. We need to try and involve all participants in the evaluation process, giving value to the participants whilst reducing the power of the tutor over the student.

What specific lessons are learnt in the live project and how are these different from lessons learnt from other studio or management projects?

Many of the lessons are the same or related to those in other studio projects. However the following points summarise some observations.

1. Students fill a unique mediating role that a professional would struggle to do - clients, particularly community clients, are often wary of professionals, local authority operatives, housing groups etc. and will open up and discuss ideas freely with students in an unthreatening environment. Many extra-ordinary and creative comments come out of community consultation events. These are always a revelation to the students.
2. The tutor student relationship is definitely altered - the tutor becoming more of a consultant or client substitute. This has ramifications – it can become problematic when they become more like the client than the client themselves, although in some projects this has been a positive change of roles for the outcome of the project!
3. The whole design and building process is constrained due to the timescales of the project, the luxury of the long-term studio project development is often not an option, so prevarication is not possible. For a number of students this is their most productive project.
4. There is an emphasis on project management skills which is not really dealt with in other projects.
5. There is the potential for the 1:1 exploration – to actually build. This requires a whole new set of skills and has many benefits. Building requires a different kind of organisation and is often where their project and time management skills fall down.



Students from Sheffield and Trondheim worked together in both Sheffield and South Norway to design and build new informal public spaces in two public parks.

6. Some different presentation skills are required, students struggle to provide these sometimes but in many cases some really imaginative work is produced. The skill of producing the creative feasibility study, necessary for all architects, is one very tangible outcome of many of the projects.
7. Some of the live projects are based abroad; this offers new challenges not found in many studio projects. Communication is even more of a challenge and there are different structures and processes to learn from - or a different emphasis created by the client from a different culture. Lessons are also learned in the universal power of design.

What are the limits of Live Projects?

One of the limiting factors is money. Often the client is at a pre-feasibility stage in their project with no money and only vague ideas about funding the project. They see using university students as a chance to gain from free work. We need to put some effort into persuading these clients to put some funding into the live projects to ease the process. Students sometimes end up spending a considerable amount of their own money on travel and disbursements. At the beginning of a project clients are often unaware of the value and quality of the work the students will produce and in some cases almost feel they are doing the university a favour with their time. It is afterwards they realise the power of the work they have, when it is too late. We need to brief clients better in this respect.

On a very practical logistical note, health and safety issues are becoming increasingly difficult to deal with. Allowing students to use power tools as part of their university course is a challenge and requires professional supervision.

Time constraints however are perhaps the biggest limiting factor to some projects, although others are almost too long. We have built up a portfolio of both challenging and ambitious live projects. All are different and all have enormous merits and some problems attached. Every year the limitation of the live projects lessen - and the possibilities grow. We are looking forward to the new projects this coming year.