ABSTRACT: The research is based at the Cass. School of Architecture, London Metropolitan University, and examines socially engaged live projects within the school's design studio. As deadlines of live projects with real collaborators and partners are not defined by the academic calendar, the studio involves different student cohorts over several years during different phases of a project, ultimately enabling an on-going live and adapting engagement with a place and its community. The paper suggests a new structure within the academic institution, which sits between academia, practice and the city. Every year, the participating students learn a different skill driven by the city and its environment, however, always in relation to previous cohorts’ activities whose work they take over to develop while it evolves. Not only do the students benefit from working on projects with continuous involvement in a specific place, but the ongoing engagement with a place also empowers communities and influences the profession of the architect. Students gain a presence in the place and establish new networks amongst communities, all required to make comprehensive and often radical changes within the city, which include physical as well as social designs. This experience equips students with a skill-set to develop self-initiated projects. As a result, the paper proposes reducing the current education from seven years to an EU competitive length of five years, where the practical year-out experience recommended by the RIBA occurs during the academic education through attending the Live Projects Studio. In order to discuss this method of teaching, the paper focuses on a case study situated in Hayes, West London, which started in 2012 and is currently ongoing.

KEYWORDS: Architecture live projects; on-going projects beyond academic year; student experience; new forms of practicing architecture; shortening architectural education; self-initiated projects.

Introduction: Live Engagement with the City and its Inhabitants
This paper is based on a research initiative at the Cass. School of Architecture, London Metropolitan University, which explores if we can develop socially engaged live projects as part of the architectural education within the undergraduate design studio. It describes projects which, in order to be successful and in contrast to common academic practice, run over several academic years. The participation in these projects, both for tutors and students, suggests an alternative way to the common architecture education based on
hypothetical cases and constructed in the classroom. Herein, students look at social and political conditions from a distance and only take a speculative angle without real engagement with the city and its inhabitants.

In contrast, the studio focuses on real projects, which are of public nature and often located in deprived areas with non-paying communities as their “clients”. These live projects are close to the practices of socially engaged art, described as typically being delivered “through collaboration, participation, dialogue, provocation and immersive experiences … [with] focus on process and [seeking] to embed themselves within the communities among whom they work.” (Froggett 2011). All live projects within this studio are defined by a continuous relationship between the students and shifting members of a community group, traditionally called the “client”. These live projects do not have a singular commissioner but their client body is made up of a network of partnerships between local community members, local stakeholders, our students and the tutors. The traditional role of the architect as a service provider - “Agent operating for” - moves towards an architect who becomes collaborator and partner - “Agent operating with” (Petrescu 2012). Through local engagement at a human scale, students acquire the tools to plan resilient architecture. As students do not act as “service providers” and are encouraged to experiment, these projects are best placed within the university context where students are offered opportunities to be involved as part of their studies and are supported by university funded academics, who are professionals as well. The research has shown great benefits for projects and communities. If care is taken to meet the learning outcomes each year, the benefits are for students alike. In addition, this method of teaching could be a respected new pathway of becoming an architect, recognized by schools of architecture and the RIBA.

Case Study Project: Re-imagining Hayes

The paper presents a project situated in Hayes, West London, which started in 2012 and will be continued into the academic year 2015-16. This case study demonstrates how a community project can be run over several years, adapting to changing conditions, and benefitting both the communities and students. So far three student cohorts worked on different phases of the project, each year redefining and developing the year’s brief, questioning the scope of work, finding their “clients” and discussing the architect’s continuing responsibility in the public realm. In the first year, the focus was on making. Students constructed a 1:1 Mobile Hut and explored social enterprise potentials in Hayes. During the second year, students concentrated on developing the programmes which go with architectural structures and are supported by local communities. Students organized a series of events, which gave rise to the creation of different clubs and fragmented building proposals on a local housing estate, the Austin Estate. In 2014-15, the students moved to
the High Street in Hayes in order to ensure the continuation of the successful programmes developed in the previous years and to expand participation to a wider community, with the emphasis on making building proposals for the High Street. In 2015-16 we will be working with Hayes Town Partnership and focus on one of the successful proposals situated on an industrial site beside the canal in order to develop design options for a canoe club.

*Aesthetic Year 2012-13: Made in Hayes - Identifying the Stakeholders*

Some will have seen the orange Mobile Hut in the different London locations; first in Hayes, West London, in front of an unused community hall. The corrugated transparent structure with an orange membrane shining through, contrasted surprisingly well with the faint yellow corrugation of a large rundown shed as the backdrop. As an indication for ongoing change in Hayes, this shed has now been replaced by porter cabins, which are used as community rooms. Hayes was the first location where the students based their self-built structure, the “Mobile Hut”, in order to explore social enterprise potentials opposite the Austin Estate. These enterprises included paper works, soap and candle making etc. In contrast to local preconceptions, the students saw that the Austin Estate has active and interested residents. They challenged the local residents through a series of “making” events and developed next year’s agenda for the following student cohort to work on, re-imagining a town hall for the estate. After travelling to Hayes, the Mobile Hut went back to its second location on Holloway Road, Islington, to be part of the Architecture Cass Summer Show and a few days later to the opening of the Art and Design Cass Summer Show in the Aldgate location. Even when the academic year had ended, the students’ showed continuing engagement. They set up a small exhibition inside of the Hut showing the results of the year’s work as part of a larger project in Hayes to be continued by a new cohort of students.

Covering all learning outcomes during the academic year, students designed a mobile room for a real client, a group called “Friends of Abbey Garden”, who paid for the construction materials and are now using the Hut. In addition to the conventional skills students acquire in the design studio (e.g. design process and representation), this cohort learned about presenting their work to a real client, which differs from presenting to an academic audience. Student feedback has shown that particularly the weak students thrive and find reasons for doing well when confronted with real clients and 1:1 making of a project. We also tested a larger office situation, where student teams took over the designs from other students for detailing. They went through all working stages in order to jointly build the structure at 1:1. This project of “Multiple Authorship” taught the students that “detail matters” and encouraged great team-building skills.
The positive response in the making workshops by the local residents of the Austin Estate initiated the exploration of the traditional building typology of a town hall against the contemporary context of the ethnically and culturally diverse housing estate and its fragmented residential community. Students gained trust of the community by continuing what the previous students had started, organizing more events - this time directly on the estate - and exploring potential programmes in order to actively engage the residents. These programmes, which derived from local interests - such as making music (Fig. 1 and 3), playing chess, sewing - became very specific to the locality. The activities were not the aim in itself, but a platform to trigger participation and identify local interests to grow future programmes to inhabit resilient architectural spaces. In Hayes, the events lead to the creation of different clubs on the estate, a youth band, a board game club and most successfully, a sewing club with growing popularity beyond the Estate and the academic year. The students learned that the success of these clubs were effective settings for resident gatherings, debating about public life and their needs. They discussed the architect’s continuing responsibility of their projects in the public realm and how to hand-over responsibility for the clubs to the residents, or – if not yet possible – to the next student cohort. Students not only developed their own briefs, but they gained confidence in taking initiative to fund the realization of their ideas. Student Susan Kudo successfully applied for a council grant to support the Sewing Club. Her project continued over the summer with the Sewing Club becoming a constituted group.

In addition to this direct work with the residents, students designed and proposed architecture fragments to accommodate the clubs, which – together - formed overall schemes. This prepared the third year of the project, focusing on designing a community space for the successful programmes developed by the students so far.
Academic Year 2014-15: Re-imagining the High Street in Hayes

This academic year aimed to enable the continuation and combination of the most successful programmes from last year surrounding music and making to re-imagine their contemporary meanings for the town centre and expand access beyond the residents of the Austin Estate to include a larger community, moving into the nearby High Street area and its backyards.

“The Austin Estate lies adjacent to the High Street, facing the blank walls of the loading bays and car parks, but also brick walls screening courtyards used for storage, play, access to homes and the sale of a large selection of shoes. On the other side of the High Street the yards form a network of neglected wilderness, parking, dumping grounds and workshops. These spaces are connected to the High Street through alleyways, and have the potential to create new links – to the Austin Estate, and to the schools and residential areas beyond.” (The Cass, Projects, 2015).

The brief asked students to engage with the local community and test how spaces for making or music performance could offer a new reading of the city centre with the High Street at its core. They organized “action days”, using personal skills to test potential programmes and sites for their proposals. Like in the previous year, these activities became a platform for participation, which brought people and potential clients together on the High Street through events such as a gramophone installation, a printing studio, a paper engineering workshop for children, dance (Fig. 2) and parkour. The links between this and last year’s programme went beyond the physical, e.g. student Milana Raic continued the work started by Susan Kudo, working with the women running the Austin Estate Sewing Club.

The studio addressed the more challenging aspects of Hayes’ transformation from a vibrant but economically struggling centre to a rapidly growing Cross Rail hub with prescribed aspirations: Proposals include Emily Wheeler’s bicycle workshop, re-imagining how bikes which had been prematurely purchased by the council and are currently in a storage, could be used by the community. A proposal for a canoe club for a canal inlet and adjacent industrial site is currently being negotiated with the site owner by student Eglantina Hoxa. This has the potential to become a large regeneration area in Hayes.

Students have gained experience in working with and presenting their work to a wide variety of audiences, ranging from local residents, shop owners to politicians and representatives of Hayes Town Partnership as well as exhibiting and discussing their work and what the future may hold for Hayes at the local library.
Running Projects Beyond the Academic Year: Academic Restrictions

As projects, conducted as part of this research, are taught in the undergraduate design studio, tutors must make sure that students not only engage with the real world, but that they obtain the skills set out as academic requirements. At the end of the academic year, the work produced needs to comply with module specifications and meet these learning outcomes. The research has shown that this is possible, as long as the tutors ensure that the resulting project is valuable for the community and the students’ academic achievement is assured.

Since 2000, we have worked on live projects with our students and researched best practice with the aim of optimising learning outcomes and student experience, as well as optimising project outcomes for our client satisfaction. In the past, live projects within the studio were structured to run one academic year only to ensure the continuity of the learning outcomes each year. Within a period of eight months, the studio completed projects with the same cohort of students, who started the project. Working with real clients and at the same time satisfying a wide range of learning outcomes meant that projects often felt rushed and remained at the scale of a room, e.g. Mobile Room for London and Community Stage in Kronberg. (Denicke-Polcher and Khonsari, 2014). Though projects often continued beyond the academic year in order to be completed (e.g. Community Stage in Kronberg), students rarely benefitted of continuous involvement and if they did, often outside of academia.

This limitation to one year was difficult for the project itself, as live projects are the reality of a place and have social, economic and physical significance, deadlines of live projects with real collaborators and partners are not defined by the academic calendar, specially with the open-ended nature of projects with non-paying clients.

As explained with the case study above, we have therefore set up the studio agenda to involve consecutive student cohorts during different phases of a project. This on-going live engagement with a place and precise set of communities, partners and collaborators is a working method which can contribute to community improvement by being agile as it puts students in a position to respond to the specific needs and agendas of communities over time. Throughout this process students experience that adaptability and flexibility is an essential skill for their future profession.

Benefits to Students

The projects run within the studio teach students a high degree of adaptability: Every year students learn different skills driven by the live engagement with the city and its environment. As students are testing their projects continuously against real conditions, e.g. presenting their projects to local partners and stakeholders or organising “action days”, they experience changes of the project’s environment directly. The need to adapt and respond
becomes a natural and not an academic one. Students feel a duty of care, which develops through the engagement with a real place and real people. This way of working allows students to connect to real-life issues and act up on these, which is key in order to respond to the growing challenges of our urban environment.

Feedback from students has demonstrated that the skills learned in the studio (e.g. self-initiating projects and seeking funding) have been valuable in order to find work and highly appreciated in times of low employment opportunities. On leaving the Studio they feel equipped with a skill-set to develop self-initiated projects, and are encouraged to explore and establish new ways of working. Being flexible and adapting to changing situations makes students fit for practice. This gives them the confidence in their future professional life to take opportunities and develop new and individual initiatives within the city for its citizens.

Benefits to Communities and the Profession of the Architect
The ongoing engagement with a place also empowers communities. Students gain a presence in the place and establish new networks amongst communities, all required to make comprehensive and often radical changes within the city, which include physical as well as social designs. This teaching method enables students, future architects, to become trusted partners and collaborators through continued and open-ended engagement. This is opposed to an architect who is a service provider “by appointment” and with limited time resource. If students are learning this way of working during their studies, they will be able to take this into their profession. The current developments observed in practice and how young architecture practices operate, shows that this engaged working attitude can influence and widen the architects scope of appointment and secure work, even in times of low construction.

Shortening the Architectural Education through University-based Practical Experience
The additional value offered through this method of teaching is a new structure for the architecture education, which sits between academic context, the city and practice, still it is based at the university. By attending the Live Projects Studio, the year-out experience recommended by the RIBA (which students usually take between RIBA Part 1 and Part 2) can therefore happen during the academic education. This not only provides the above benefits to students and communities, it could shorten the architectural education in the UK, while still providing a practical experience to the students’ education.

This method of teaching responds to current trends of educational reform, e.g. London School of Architecture’s ambition to “transform training in the Capital” (Evening Standard, 2015). At the ASN conference *Lines Drawn* (2014) students stressed the “importance of
practices playing a role in their academic and professional training" and of “live projects… seen as a positive step in engaging with the real world.”

Conclusion: Rethinking Architecture Education and Employability
The research has shown that teaching socially engaged live projects as part of the architectural education within the design studio comes with great benefits for the project itself, for the communities attached, as well as for our students. The case study “Re-imagining Hayes” demonstrates that architects and students need to remain community collaborators over a long period of time, free from the academic calendar, in order for projects to be successful and holistic in a social and cultural sense. The unlimited engagement with a place and community allows trust to be built up, a resilient and experimental approach to projects and – if necessary – to adapt proposals to the fast changing environment of our cities. The benefits for the students go beyond the learning outcomes, which are set in the module specifications. Joining the live projects studio has a great impact on employability. It prepares students for practice and teaches the skills to self-initiate projects. Feedback has also shown that students find working on live projects with real stakeholders extremely rewarding, giving them a reason for working beyond the academic achievement - as a side effect often improving their grades - and providing them with a sense of duty of care. In addition, the paper is advocating that a year in the Live Projects Studio combines academic experience with practice. The year in the Live Projects Studio could count towards the PEDR (Professional Experience and Development Record), which is required in order to become an ARB registered architect in the UK. The tutors, who are leading the live project, could act as employment mentors, supervising the academic and professional experience and work closely with the university-based PSA (Professional Studies Advisor). This way, the architectural education can be shortened by the year-out experience, reducing the overall time of studying and making the UK based education competitive with the time of studying in most EU countries.

References

