

# 9

## ARCHITECTURE OF MULTIPLE AUTHORSHIP

Beyond the academic year

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### Live engagement with the city and its inhabitants

For several years now, an architecture research initiative at The Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design, London Metropolitan University, has been exploring the possibilities of socially engaged live projects<sup>1</sup> within the undergraduate design studio, bridging boundaries between academia, practice and the city. 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 ongoing live and adapting engagement with a place and its community. Participation in these projects, both for tutors and students, suggests an alternative method to more established models of architectural education based on hypothetical cases and constructed in the classroom, where 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 new architecture studio at The Cass focuses on real projects, which are of a public nature and often located in deprived areas with non-paying communities as their 'clients'. 'Architecture of Multiple Authorship' reflects an engaged pedagogy, where students and tutors' are dedicated towards supporting local community resilience. The continuous engagement with a place and slow passing on of skills to community members grows knowledge over cohorts; not only does it achieve community resilience, but students also learn skills of resilience as a group.

The live projects undertaken at The Cass are close to the practices of socially engaged art, described as typically being delivered 'through collaboration, participation, dialogue, provocation and immersive experiences ... [with a] focus on process and [seeking] to embed themselves within the communities among whom they work' (Froggett et al. 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. Through these projects we aim to move from the traditional role of the architect as a service provider – an ‘agent operating for’ – towards an architect who becomes a collaborator and partner – an ‘agent operating with’ (Petrescu 2012). Through local engagement at a human scale, students acquire the tools – an empathic and flexible working attitude – to plan ‘resilient architecture’. This can take the form of physical space, social engagement or spatial strategy development to accommodate current realities. This way of developing architecture creates spaces which are adaptable to the fast-changing needs of our cities and their inhabitants and develops architecture which is able to adapt to changing realities. 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, students can also benefit. This method of teaching could become a respected new pathway to accreditation, recognised both by other schools of architecture and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

### Case study project: re-imagining Hayes

A case study of an ongoing project situated in Hayes, West London demonstrates how a community project can be run over several years, adapting to changing conditions and benefiting both the communities and students. So far, three student cohorts have 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 the potential of social enterprise in Hayes (Figure 9.1). During the second year, students concentrated on developing programmes that imply architectural structures and are supported by local communities. Students organised a series of events, which gave rise to the creation of different clubs and fragmented building proposals on the local Austin housing estate. In 2014–2015, 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 an emphasis on developing building proposals for the High Street. In 2015–2016 students worked with Hayes Town Partnership to focus on one of the successful proposals situated on an industrial site beside the canal; developing design options for a canoe club.



**FIGURE 9.1** Mobile Workshop in Hayes by Studio 3.

Source: author

### Academic year 2012–2013: made in Hayes – identifying the stakeholders

Some will have seen an orange Mobile Hut in 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 indicator of ongoing change in Hayes, this shed has now been replaced by Portakabins, 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 potential social enterprise opposite the Austin Estate. These enterprises included paper works and soap and candle making. In contrast to local preconceptions, the students observed that the Austin Estate has active and engaged residents. They challenged the local residents through a series of 'making' events and developed an agenda for the following year's student cohort to work on, re-imagining a town hall for the estate. After travelling to Hayes, the Mobile Hut returned 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 Aldgate. Even when the academic year had ended, the students continued showing commitment, which enabled easy transition into entrepreneurial practice. They set up a small exhibition inside 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 the Mobile Hut 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 the 1:1 making of a project. We also tested a larger office situation, where student teams took over 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.

### **Academic year 2013–2014: re-imagining a Town Hall for the Austin Estate through events**

The positive response of the local residents of the Austin Estate to the making workshops initiated an exploration of the traditional building typology of a town hall in the contemporary context of the ethnically and culturally diverse housing estate and its fragmented residential community. Students gained the trust of the community by continuing what the previous students had started, organising 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, playing chess and sewing – became very specific to the locality (Figures 9.2, 9.3 and 9.4).

The activities were not the aim in itself, but a platform to trigger participation and identify local interests to grow future programmes leading to the design of resilient architectural spaces. Students learnt to trust that their professional engagement can achieve positive change through the design of spaces, which can be inhabited in a long-lasting manner. These can be physical spaces, but also social engagements and urban strategies. In Hayes, the events led 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 learnt that the success of these clubs made them effective settings for resident gatherings, and debates about public life and their needs. Students learnt resourceful judgement: sometimes setting up a club proved successful enough to improve the residents’ everyday lives and impacted positively on the perception and use of the physical spaces they inhabited, and no new building at extra expense was required. They discussed the architects’ continuing responsibility for their projects in the public realm and how to hand over responsibility for the clubs to the residents or – if that was not yet possible – to the next student cohort. Students not only developed their own briefs, but gained confidence in taking the initiative to fund the realisation of their ideas. Student Susan Kudo successfully applied for a council grant to support the Sewing



**FIGURE 9.2** ‘Roaming Musical Instruments on the Austin Estate’ by Reham Elwakil.

Source: author

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 architectural fragments to accommodate the clubs, which – together – formed larger schemes. This prepared the third year of the project, focusing on designing a community space for the successful programmes developed by the students in previous cohorts.

### **Academic year 2014–2015: re-imagining the High Street in Hayes**

This academic year aimed to enable the continuation and combination of the most successful music and making programmes from the previous year. Their



**FIGURE 9.3** ‘Dance Studio on the High Street’ by Htike Yadana.

Source: author

contemporary meanings were re-imagined for the town centre, expanding 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 organised ‘action days’, using personal skills to test potential programmes and sites for their proposals. As 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, a dance installation (Figure 9.3) and parkour. The links



**FIGURE 9.4** ‘Austin’s Stage’ by Ania Folejewska.

Source: author

between this and last year’s programme went beyond the physical. Student Milana Raic, for example, 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’s transformation from a vibrant but economically struggling centre to a rapidly growing Crossrail hub with prescribed aspirations: students’ proposals included Emily Wheeler’s bicycle workshop, re-imagining how bikes which had been prematurely purchased by the council and remained unused in a storage could be used by the community. Student Eglantina Hoxa negotiated a proposal for a canoe club for a canal inlet and adjacent industrial site with the site owner. This had the potential to become a large regeneration area in Hayes.<sup>2</sup>

Students have gained experience in working with and presenting their work to a wide variety of audiences, ranging from local residents and 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 these projects 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 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 clients' satisfaction. In the past, live projects within the studio were structured to run for 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 – for example, the Mobile Room for London and Community Stage in Kronberg (Denicke-Polcher & Khonsari 2014). Although projects often continued beyond the academic year in order to be completed (e.g. the Community Stage in Kronberg), students rarely benefited from the continuous involvement, and if they did, it was often outside academia.

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

As the case study in Hayes demonstrates, The Cass has therefore set up a studio structure enabling involvement of consecutive student cohorts during different phases of a project. This ongoing live engagement with a place and a 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 learn that adaptability and flexibility are essential skills 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 – for example, presenting their projects to local partners and stakeholders or organising 'action days' – they experience changes in the project's environment directly. Through the engagement with a real place and

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real people, the need to adapt and respond becomes a natural necessity based on a student's duty of care instead of being an academic response. This way of working allows students to connect to real-life issues and act on these, as well as to learn essential skills of adaptability and being responsive, which are key in order to react appropriately 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, the students 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 alternative practice: it gives them confidence in their future professional lives and taking entrepreneurial opportunities to develop new and individual initiatives within the city for its citizens.

**Benefits to communities and the architectural profession**

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 engagements. This teaching method enables students – future architects – to become trusted partners and collaborators through continued and open-ended engagement. This model is the opposite of an architect who is a service provider ‘by appointment’ with a limited time resource. If students are learning this engaged way of working during their studies, participating in ‘what’s happening on the ground’ and being ‘conscious of the role of their work in creating ... the worlds we inhabit’ (Gibson-Graham 2008), they will be able to take this commitment into a fulfilled and productive professional life. The current developments observed in practice and how young architecture practices operate show that this engaged working attitude can influence and widen an architect’s scope of appointment and help to secure work, even in times of low construction.

**Shortening architectural education through university-based practical experience**

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

This method of teaching responds to current trends of educational reform, for example the London School of Architecture's ambition to 'transform training in the Capital' (Bevan 2015). At the Architecture Students Network 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'.

### Rethinking architectural education and employability

This research has shown that teaching socially engaged live projects as part of architectural education within the design studio comes with great benefits for the project itself, for the communities attached, as well as for 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, and represents a resilient and experimental approach to projects which can, if necessary, allow proposals to adapt 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 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 academic achievement – often improving their grades – and providing them with a sense of duty of care. In addition, a year in the Live Projects Studio combines academic experience with practice. The experience could count towards the Professional Experience and Development Record which is required in order to become an Architects Registration Board-registered architect in the UK. Tutors who lead the live project could act as employment mentors, supervising the academic and professional experience and working closely with the university-based Professional Studies Advisor. In this way, architectural education can be shortened, reducing the overall time of studying and making UK-based education more competitive, matching the period of study in most EU countries.

### Notes

- 1 The live projects described here are defined to have real clients and operate within a real time frame often lasting beyond the academic year, but they do not necessarily have to result in the construction of a building.
- 2 Eighteen months later, this site with fragmented ownership has been purchased by a developer, and the planning application for a large-scale housing development with 124 apartments is in the final stages of planning approval. The council insisted on the inclusion of public amenities to accommodate a local canoe club, as originated by student Eglantina Hoxa.

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