Architecture Live Projects

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Summary

The Live Project programme, now in its 14th year, is widely recognised as an innovative form of teaching and learning within UK architectural education, offering students the opportunity to move out of the design studio and test design ideas in a real-world context.

Live Projects offer groups of architecture students the chance to work for client organisations outside the University, producing built and strategic design solutions with a particular emphasis on community participation and collaborative working.

Live Projects vary immensely in scale, subject and scope but there are similarities between them; they all have a social agenda, they are all student-led and their outcomes must be useful to the client. Clients are chosen on the basis of their social remit and so tend to be charities, schools, local council organisations or local community groups. Some projects result in actually building something and others are more strategic, proposing visions and masterplans on a local, city-wide, regional, national and international scale.

What issues are you trying to address?

We see the Live Projects as important in educating architects of the future. The Live Projects develop skills in collaborative ways of working, communication and participatory practice – all approaches that are essential to the future practitioner but so often not addressed by conventional architectural education. Live Projects get students out of the ivory tower of academia (for Sheffield School of Architecture in the Arts Tower this isn't just a metaphor!) into the real world and establish an awareness of the social responsibility of the architect. The aim is to produce work of exceptional quality that empowers client and student alike.

What impact did your initiative have?

There are tangible outcomes from the Live Projects (design proposals, strategic visions, prototypes, models, surveys, buildings) that are extremely useful resources for the clients, but the effects of the processes of working together with all the stakeholders involved in the projects have an impact that can be just as valuable. Because they do not fit within any pre-existing project or procurement process, Live Projects can make connections between groups that did not exist previously and involve marginalised groups that did not have a voice previously. All parties collaborate in learning, training and sharing of knowledge and skills. Fundamentally, Live
Projects make a difference by putting into practice many things that we value in our learning and teaching at Sheffield School of Architecture.

After taking part in a Live Project, students often say how much they feel they’ve learnt from the experience. They see evidence of the skills they have acquired and developed over the six weeks in a direct feedback loop between them, their clients and their staff mentors. Within the Live Projects students learn how to work efficiently and creatively in a group, negotiate with complex client and stakeholder teams, stage effective and creative participatory events, think strategically, manage resources, and communicate clearly both verbally and through visual material. Beyond the immediate work that the project requires often a group will take part in fund-raising, education, outreach and will form an understanding of alternative economies, political structures and social networks.

What advice would you give others if they were to implement a similar approach?

It is important in 'real' projects to maintain a critical and reflective attitude to the work that is being produced and the processes involved. This is difficult in the fast and furious context of working to deadlines for external clients but it is key to the learning experience. Students need to be supported to be critical of their projects, to set their learning in the wider context of their education and the world of work beyond the university. It is important that they are given time to reflect in groups and individually upon their experiences after the projects have been completed.

Assessment is tricky when all projects are structured differently and with different outcomes. We have found it best to focus on processes (although we do acknowledge outcomes in the marking) and we make sure the assessment criteria are clear and communicated to the students from the start.

It is crucial that students do not feel exploited and working for clients 'on the cheap'. This is why we do not take on conventional architecture projects for private clients. We are very careful to be transparent to clients and students alike about motives, aspirations and funding of the projects.

Any other comments

Client feedback:

“The students have pushed the boundaries of the architect’s role in regeneration projects to produce a vision for Accrington town centre which was highly effective in engaging with local people and empowering them to influence the regeneration of their neighbourhoods. This document went on to influence the briefing process for a new masterplan of the town centre in its advocacy for the creative engagement of local people.” Hyndburn Borough Council

Student feedback:

“My experience of the Live Projects was invaluable. The Live Projects demand depth, reactivity and logic and most importantly a confidence to present ideas to real life clients – this kind of experience is often hard to acquire even after years of being in practice. Even now, it is still proving to be something of an ace card during interviews.” Alex Jones

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