Live projects don't work.  
So why bother?

Simon Bradbury and Efthimia Papaefthimiou  
Plymouth University

Introduction

The use of live projects is gaining interest in the UK due to both the pedagogic benefits for students but also as a way of developing project ideas for organisations and communities who have limited resources or for less well defined projects. The relationship that is set up between the external organisation and students assumes both will benefit from this collaboration either pedagogically or through services provided.

The challenge is striking the right balance between pedagogic benefits versus providing a service, particularly where projects are large in scale, difficult to define and politically sensitive. This paper discusses why it is difficult to achieve this balance without a reconsideration of the role of student projects within a professional context. It uses as its basis a large scale live urban project undertaken by Plymouth Master of Architecture Students that has been running since September 2011.

Understanding the live project and its challenges

Live projects can take a number of forms although Rachel Sara provides a helpful definition:

"a type of learning project which is distinct in its engagement of real ‘external collaborators’, such as clients or users. This external involvement tends to result in students producing something that is of value to the external collaborator, which might range from ideas, feasibility reports, or research, to a completed design scheme, a construction or other intervention. The remit of the project is typically worked out in collaboration with the external collaborators, rather than being imposed by the lecturer." 1

This definition as well as others 2 emphasise the dual context of the live project endeavor. Firstly to provide something to the user or community that is of value (a particular output) the other to provide a pedagogic benefit to the student. In the USA, where the idea of live projects was initiated over 40 years ago through the establishment of Community Design Centers, these two elements are described as ‘service’ and ‘learning’ 3. They are bound together with a recognition that the pedagogic benefits should not be a bi-product of the service being provided or indeed that the communities being engaged should not be exploited as a laboratory setting for Universities.

In addition to these two elements and imbedded in much of the work undertaken in the USA by educators such Kenneth Reardon 4, was the explicit reflection and questioning of issues relating to economic, political and social structures. This is linked to the activist pedagogic philosophies of Paolo Freire 5.

Although live projects (or serviced learning) have been around for some time it is only recently there has been a much more critical focus on the problems and challenges of working in live projects and not simply describing them as successful collaborations 6. Specifically an emerging concern is how to deal with boundaries that separate these groups when trying to evaluate the effectiveness of projects 1.

In the UK, literature that evaluates the pedagogic benefits have primarily focused on the students' experience and learning 8 and although effective have not interrogated the wider impact of projects on communities and practitioners or been able to interrogate the nature of the boundary between the two. This paper is interested in understanding the pedagogic benefits and the value of the service being provided as a way of interrogating the boundary between these two contexts. It aims to achieve this by studying what students and practitioners learn and how they benefit from this type of collaboration.

Case study

Over the last two years the Plymouth University Master of Architecture program, Plymouth City Council and the newly formed Waterfront Business Improvement District (BID) have set up an informal partnership to support the development of the waterfront of the city. This arrangement uses the 1st year Master of Architecture students design projects to develop
both urban strategies and building designs for a range of areas on the waterfront of the city as a way of supporting both the Council and the BID to develop and implement projects.

This collaboration comprises of two elements: firstly an internal working group at the city council which includes officers from Economic Development, Planning and Estates, academics from Architecture and Planning and is chaired by a board member of the BID.

This working group is responsible for developing development strategies for the waterfront of Plymouth that can then be adopted by the city council and the BID, particularly in the context of a revision to the current planning policy in the city. The working group meets once a month.

Secondly, the Master of Architecture 1st year students are asked to undertake a study of the waterfront developing initially an urban strategy and then a building proposition for a site. The urban strategy considers not only the spatial issues but also the social, political, environmental and economic contexts. These ideas are then fed back to the waterfront working group (directly by students and the tutor) to influence and develop the thinking of the working group, the council and BID.

The collaboration was set up in September 2011 with the first co-hort of students developing projects that were completed in June 2012. In June 2013 a second group of students undertook the project which was coupled with a research programme aimed at understanding the effectiveness of the process. This paper draws primarily on data gathered as part of the second phase of work.

There were a number of key points in the project where students and practitioners came together. An initial symposium in September organised by the University on behalf of the BID aimed at bringing together a range of parties including councilors and resident groups who were involved with the waterfront to discuss issues and challenges that related to the waterfront. This was followed by periodic engagement with the project by the working group (who attended studio reviews) as well as a range of other stakeholders who the students contacted directly. At the end of the year students presented their work to the working group.

Methodology

The aim of this project was to understand the boundary between these two communities (students and practitioners) through understanding the benefits of engaging in the project and what students and practitioners learned. One of the challenges with trying to understand what people learn is that they are very often unaware of what they have learnt or even if they are aware are unable to articulate it. Therefore reflective and indirect methods were used to interrogate the learning journey through the year. Reflective data were gathered through semi-structured interviews where students and practitioners discussed their work around the following themes:

- their understanding of how projects emerge and are delivered in the city
- their perceptions and aspirations for engaging with the collaboration
- their perception of how student work alters the live project

Indirect data were gathered by looking at student projects, minutes from meetings and council documents. Interviews were held with 8 students and 6 practitioners.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and this along with the indirect data was organised into themed areas which are presented in this paper.

Research findings

This section discusses first the learning and boundaries identified from the student perspective before describing some common themes in student projects. This is then compared to the practitioners’ perspective and the development of the live project.

Student learning

If a live project is to be successful it needs firstly to provide pedagogic benefits to students. There were a number of characteristics identified by students as valuable and of benefit including: connections to future and previous professional practice:
"I see this project as a progression of my working experience during year out and I really enjoy it. I feel like I have to work and communicate in two levels: public and professionals"

"I see it as I am still working on my year out, I feel that I have to act very professionally and responsible to meet people’s needs"

improved motivation and enthusiasm:

"I am very excited to participate in this project; it will give me the opportunity to learn more through the engagement with different people, professionals and the community"

"It is the first time I have participated in a live project. It’s quite early to comment on my experience, but I am really excited about it. I can’t wait to start working for it"

and finally a sense of importance with regard to what they were doing by working with a real client:

"[the symposium] made me feel more realistic about the project, I felt that what we are doing is actually quite serious and responsible."

"it is very positive to have grounded ideas, it helps us to think realistically"

Similar observations have been identified by other authors.

Perceived boundaries by students

Interestingly from the student perspective they believed that despite the reality of the projects they were producing they would not have an impact on practitioners. This was due to two key issues. Firstly because they believed that the council was only interested in specific solutions for the short term:

"I think there is an issue of time scale with the practitioners involved in the project. I have the impression that they require direct and quick solutions for the waterfront, whereas we propose long term projects, with greater economic, political and social impact not just for the foreshore but for the wider area of Plymouth."

The second more challenging issue was a perception that they had a very different value set and way of working to practitioners which when embedded into their projects (no matter how real they were) would mean they were unlikely to be developed:

"I think our proposals are going to seem quite challenging to practitioners. We are proposing a very holistic approach, very technologically driven with great social and environmental impact. It is very ambitious, but it is very realistic as well"

What is interesting is they believed their values were shaped by the Master of Architecture programme, and the primary importance was to answer to the academic context first not the real context.

"when I say I am positive for the outcome of my urban strategy, I mean that I hope my tutors will appreciate the approach we took. As far as the practitioners are concerned, I think that they might find it interesting or challenging but they will not act on it."

"I don’t think they are going to implement our ideas, since the core agenda of the school is socially and politically skewed on a broader scale and the city council seems to be narrow-minded"

Common themes in student projects

There were a number of common themes in student projects that ran through both years which are helpful to discuss in the context of what emerged in the live project. Firstly ideas around the politics of projects and their delivery. One of the challenges when working on large complex urban projects is connecting a vision with a viable proposition for how it would be delivered. Prior to the start of the project the majority of students were interested in how a bottom-up process in opposition to a council-led approach would be necessary to solve the problems of Plymouth’s waterfront.

"I think that people don’t have to rely on the city council. People are strong enough to make a change for themselves."

As projects developed there became a much clearer understanding of the importance of alliances between institutions, alongside community engagement as mechanisms for delivering projects. This was coupled with
strategies for phasing of projects and delivering them in the short as well as long term. It resulted in a number of student projects including the development of new organisations and business plans to facilitate the delivery of their urban strategy and a strong focus on process. However this did not prejudice the type of project that was produced that included both small scale temporary interventions to much larger projects that would require significant capital investment.

This shift in understanding of the complexity of the urban environment and the need for a political and institutional dimension to projects arose out of a reaction by students to the first symposium where there were a range interested parties. In the discussion there was what some may have perceived as a lack of leadership and direction from the city council and other institutions.

Secondly there was a strong oppositional approach to neo-liberal models of regeneration focusing in particular on themes around re-industrialisation and other industries (outside of tourism, retail and food) to redevelop the waterfront.

Thirdly projects attempted to understand the interconnected environmental context particularly resource flows in cities and how these could be restructured (food, fuel, waste etc).

Finally, the projects also looked to understand how they were supporting and helping the existing disadvantaged communities of the city, particularly in the context of a waterfront that is subject to regeneration policies that are likely to gentrify and displace many of the existing communities.

Practitioner learning

The practitioners believed there was a value in undertaking the project in order to bring "fresh and challenging ideas, free from limitations". However, unlike for students, there was limited evidence of other pedagogic benefits although there was recognition by practitioners of the benefits students would have through engaging in the project.

"It is very good to allow students to have a more practical and realist project instead of just a theoretical one. It creates more mature and responsible students’

Perceived boundaries by practitioners

With regard to boundaries with working with students they were identified as relating to timescales of projects in the city not matching with the academic calendar as well as struggling to find time to be involved in the studio environment. Unlike students there was not a question of the nature of the projects being produced being too difficult to implement. However, as will be discussed below, there was little evidence of student projects directly influencing the live project.

The live project

As has been discussed the live project in the city was ill defined at the start of this process. At the end of the first year of undertaking the project the city council and PWP asked the University to develop a report detailing a 3 year strategy for the waterfront. This was undertaken by a small number of students from the studio overseen by academics. This report did not directly use student projects in developing its recommendations but did build on some general themes that were emerging from the design studio projects (discussed above). These included:

- How to bring together a range of institutions to start development in the short term through temporary uses.
- Using derelict and vacant council owned land and buildings to facilitate regeneration.
- Looking at uses that were not just tourism or retail based.

This report and ongoing work has led to the inclusion of strategies for bringing forward sites and projects in a number of city wide strategies such as the Plan for Jobs. A clear link between the report and the council strategy can be seen:

“Temporary uses offer an opportunity to deliver change quickly in an area overcoming many of the legal and financial constraints of larger projects. Using the vacant sites and buildings for temporary uses provides an opportunity for new enterprises to emerge which will quickly enliven
the area while providing some short term revenue to land owners. “Report 2012

“We will also seek out opportunities for the proactive utilisation of “meanwhile” uses for under occupied land and buildings, including the creation of a list of commercial premises that could provide social enterprises and new businesses a head start in Plymouth.” Plymouth Plan for Jobs 2013

Discussion, did the live project work?

If a successful live project, as defined at the start of this paper, needs to have both a useful service or output from the studio for the community and a pedagogic benefit to students, then this project could be deemed as a failure.

This is because the critical and reflective process that is part of the pedagogic structure of an academic environment and fundamental to the success of a live project is too challenging for practitioners to use directly especially on large urban projects. This is particularly difficult when, as in Plymouth, the socio-political underpinning of the studio (which is a strong influence on student projects) questions the fundamental neoliberal model of regeneration currently being used in the city. This questioning of the socio-political context of regeneration however should not be cast aside in order to provide a better service to practitioners as this has been an important part of the more activist elements of live projects and should continue to be so.

Despite the apparent failure of student outputs to influence the live project the engagement of students and academics was still able to influence and change policy in the city and is continuing to do so. This was because the studio outputs were mediated through consultancy projects and ongoing dialogue with academics allowing concepts and ideas to cross boundaries. This does not undermine the student work or their pedagogic value of live projects. Indeed on completion of the project one student when asked if student projects were ‘real’ responded:

“Yes and no, it was produced first and foremost as a student project as part of my Master of Architecture course at the University. However […] the student projects have varying degrees of realism, and varying degrees to which they may or may not be able to be implemented. Many projects focused on small scale changes at a grassroots level – and as such can have at least a chance of realisation at some level. However projects focusing on larger scale issues, involving a greater number of actors and large capital expenditure can really only act as prompts for discussions on certain issues such as reindustrialisation.”

Implications for pedagogy and practice

This model of mediation between student project and live project has a number of implications for both pedagogy and academics.

With regard to a pedagogic model for how live projects, they projects have been linked to learning theories such as situated learning 11, problem based learning 12, learning as peripheral participation in communities of practice 13 and action learning. It also fits comfortably with community activist’s ideas from Freire and Dewey and others grounding the process in an idea of transformative learning for both the students and communities.

Wenger’s theoretical framework, learning as peripheral participation in communities of practice offers one way of conceptualising the relationships between communities of practice and is helpful. However it has been widely criticized as a framework for understanding more complex work relationships in institutional contexts. A more appropriate theoretical framework in this context is to consider each community of practice as an activity system where:

“An activity system is a complex and relatively enduring ‘community of practice’ that often takes the shape of an institution. Activity systems are enacted in the form of individual goal-directed actions.”

Each activity system (in this context it would include the council, the BID, Academics and students) have their own rules, political structures and ways of working but come together to solve a single problem. In this context each activity system would develop its own solution (object) to this problem that would then be mediated and transformed between each system.

The important outcome therefore is not the object from one activity system (the individual
design project) but the mediated object that arises as a result of these coming together. The argument in this paper is achieving this mediated object becomes the role of the academic to facilitate if live projects are going to have impact and be of value to practitioners.

This of course places a number of additional pressures on academics which has been helpfully discussed by Siemiatycki. Academics in planning contexts need to undertake a number of different roles including independent outsider, public planner, contractor, community based planner, and activist.

This necessarily means that Academics will enter the political sphere where “the power dynamics and points of tension between the partners can become increasingly unclear” However if academics are truly to enter the sphere of live projects along with their students offering critical insight into the future of our cities with the ambition to improve them it will be necessary to accept this challenge.

---


3 Ibid.


7 Angotti, Doble, and Horrigan, Service-Learning in Design and Planning.


10 Hardin, From the Studio to the Streets.


14 Ibid.


18 Ibid., 157.