The Real Deal: Case Studies in Alternative Teaching Strategies

Derek Hill
Department of Architecture, University of Strathclyde

Introduction
Architectural education in Britain is currently under its most wide reaching review since the format was established in the 1950s. Against this backdrop, and faced with a weakened construction industry and a profession unable to supply the demand for post graduate jobs, schools of architecture may look to alternative methods, approaches and creative solutions in preparing the next generation of architects.

This may come sooner rather than later as the Royal Institute of Architects (RIBA) is considering radical changes to the delivery of architectural education throughout RIBA accredited schools. These changes could, in effect, allow a graduate to register as ‘architect’ at the end of university study eliminating the current RIBA Parts I, II, and III system which requires applicants to complete a minimum of 24 months experience in practice before being eligible to sit the Part III Examinations.

The University of Strathclyde, Glasgow has developed several collaborative design processes to expose its students to an architectural education not limited to books, drawings and balsa wood models. Instead they are provided with an altogether different pedagogy which seeks to embrace the RIBA principle of embedded professional content.

Practices such as Dress for the Weather, Roots Design Workshop and Do Architecture now give much back to the Department as guest lecturers and Studio Design Tutors and will, no doubt, recognise the influence the education gained during their time in the Department has had on their practice philosophy today. The Department has long promoted an ethic of self-motivation, self-promotion, and an attitude towards entrepreneurialism and social engagement which is evident in the work of these practices today.

Students have been encouraged to engage with real clients, on real projects, in collaboration with real industry expertise. These collaborations come, not in addition to the students’ curriculum of learning, but as a fully integrated facet of it, and as early in their education as Year One / Project One.

Curricular Integration

For their first project in Year One, students are tasked with designing a small installation from a limited palette of materials to serve as a shelter for two people.

Initially designing without context, the students are introduced to client (Jonny Sutherland of Wiston Lodge - a 52 acre woodland estate - who assists with the selection of a short list of schemes), budget (a very modest £100 per structure), transportation and delivery (consideration of component size and logistics), scheduling (of tasks, personnel and materials) and finally context and construction when they travel to Wiston Lodge and assemble their installations over two days of Live Build.
The entire process is complete when the students ‘hand over’ their installations to the client team at Wiston Lodge who then utilise the structures as part of their programme for the delivery of assistance in personal, social and emotional development of children and young adults.

The second project in Year One builds on these strategies and is used to deliver a Department Design Project with Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. With a budget of £5000, the Department has been tasked with delivering a resting point along the Scenic Routes trail within the National Park. Year 1 develop ideas through their Studio Design project and this time the project commences with observations on context – the eastern banks of Loch Iubhair. Supporting lectures and workshops are delivered by landscape architects, artists and engineers, offering industry expertise to the students in the early design stages of the project. An initial meeting with the client from the National Park allows the students to identify client requirements relating to size, function, durability, materiality and permanence. Although the Year One project ends with the submission of design proposals, the Department has agreed a three year programme with the National Park which will allow the detail design, fabrication and construction of the structures through a vertically integrated model of collaboration within the Department, involving Year One, Year Four and Year Five Thesis students.

In the second semester, the Year One students of the Department are again focussed on client when they engage with a group of high profile contemporary artists for the design of a gallery in the city. These artist collaborations were achieved through existing, strong links to the Glasgow Visual Arts Community with members of the Year One Studio Design Tutor team – a team made up almost entirely by practicing architects.

During initial discussions with the Department, the clients help to identify three potential sites throughout the city and, through research, observation and discussion, the students must provide a feasibility study into the most appropriate site for the gallery. Thereafter the project develops on the basis of ‘conversations’ between the ‘architect’ and the ‘client’ allowing students to make design decisions from a point of reaction when traditionally, at this stage, these decisions are made from self-desire.

It is hoped that, through this project process, the students are exposed to aspects of the profession normally saved for time in practice. Early exposure to client in the initial stages of a project will better prepare students of architecture for the importance of client/community engagement and consultation.
Special Study Class

In academic session 2013-2014, the Department introduced a new Special Study Class which presents students with the opportunity to gain further exposure to real projects, collaborations and processes. The class was initially established to deliver the Department Yearbook and End of Year Exhibition but it became clear that this class, which would provide the students 20 of the required 120 credits towards their Honours Degree, could deliver much more in terms of experience, learning and opportunity.

While the opportunity for students of architecture to get their hands dirty through a construction process is, a positive one, perhaps more important is the opportunity for students to understand the processes which take a drawing into reality. The aim for the Special Study Class is therefore to provide exposure to the processes from concept to delivery, working with industry professionals on projects that require funding streams, must react to actual deadlines and which may or may not come to fruition.

Students are presented with a range of real projects to work on for a period of time. These projects exist in one form or another within various Design Practices but require a degree of additional input or resourcing in order to be truly realised. Existing links between industry and academia have allowed symbiotic relationships to be forged: industry projects require resourcing, students of architecture are hungry for experience. The concept is simple: small groups of students (Design Team) unite with practicing architects and Department staff (Design Directors) to form ‘Design Practices’ enabling the resourcing and delivery of these projects.

Case Studies

The mechanics of the class were piloted during the summer recess of 2013 through a submitted response to ArchTriumph’s ideas based design competition for a floating pavilion in Venice. A selection of students across all years of the Department were invited to form a small Design Team to work with local practice, and Department alumni, Dress for the Weather. Students from Years One, Three, Four and Five signed up and the design process commenced with weekly Design Team Meetings – chaired by Dress for the Weather principals Andy Campbell and Matt McKenna. The students retained control of design output, guided and mentored by Andy and Matt throughout.

What became evident through this process was that motivation was an issue, with the Year four and five students dropping out midway through the project. Through post completion feedback the students cited external pressures and commitments as the main reasons leading to their disengagement from the process as well as noting, briefly, that the lack of academic ‘recognition’ also played a part in their decision to end their involvement.

As a case study, the process was of greater interest than the output – which was a rather romantic proposal for a series of individual floating platforms to drift from the various disparate communities around Venice and gather to form one larger platform in the lagoon south of St Mark’s Square. Despite the lack of motivation evident within some group members, the dynamic established between industry and academia was positive and it was concluded that this was worthy of further development.

Real Projects

These case studies proved very useful when developing the syllabus for the Special Study Class. The initial model proposed was for a class of 12 students working on Yearbook and Exhibition and four design projects (three students per project). The reality was that 16 students expressed an interest in, and signed up for the class, titled Special Study Live Build meaning additional collaborations were sought.

The first semester focused on laying the foundations for the Yearbook and End of Year Exhibition – a grand plan to take the Department into the City with a series of ‘pop-up’ exhibitions in various stalled spaces throughout Glasgow. This allowed discussions to be on-going with industry partners and potential collaborators in preparation for semester 2.
On 22nd January 2014, six projects were presented to the class by Department staff, Thesis Students and professionals from architectural practice. Students were invited to submit ‘statements of interest and suitability’ to allow the Design Teams to be formed for the projects. The six projects were:

**Wiston Lodge Site Labs.** Collaboration with Department Design Staff on the production of a feasibility paper on the refurbishment of two existing mobile homes into teaching and activity space within the Wiston Lodge Estate. An additional element to this collaboration was the possibility of a summer school to carry out the refurbishment work in collaboration with apprentice joiners and electricians.

**Pub Typologies.** Collaboration with Dress for the Weather on the production of a Research Paper into the history and design of the Glasgow public house to be published to coincide with the opening of the Department of Year Exhibition.

**Kinnelside Farm.** Collaboration with Department Alumni on the production of a feasibility study into the reuse of derelict agricultural buildings as holiday accommodation for a local land owner. The feasibility study should include a drawing package suitable for the submission of a Planning Application.

**Scenic Routes Pavilion.** Collaboration with Department Thesis Students on the design development, fabrication and construction of the Department’s Scenic Routes Pavilion for Loch Lommond and the Trossachs National Park. This project delivers student vertical integration through the Department and is the first of three similar projects to be rolled out with the National Park before 2016.

**Mini-Mobile Theatre.** Collaboration with Factory Architecture on the design, fabrication and construction of a mobile theatre for the production *Grandad and Me* by *The Letter J*. A significant element within this project is in assisting the client with sourcing suitable and available funding opportunities.

**Event Space at Caledonia Road Church.** Collaboration with Department Alumni Lateral North in conjunction with local installation artist Peter McCaughey on design proposals for a temporary event space within the ruin of a former church (designed by Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson) for the Commonwealth Games in July 2014. This project is backed by Glasgow City Council with £10,000 funding secured.

The commonality across these projects is that they were each lacking in appropriate resourcing in order to drive them forward. The Special Study Class has provided this resource and the 16 students were distributed across the projects based on their submitted statement of interest and suitability. Thereafter the projects continued under the stewardship of the collaborator/s with student involvement as and when required by the project programme.

Due to the nature of the process, the class did not sit within the rigid formality of an academic timetable. Rather it operated through emerging liaisons between students and industry with meetings, charettes and discussions being encouraged to happen out with the Department to further develop links to reality. At appropriate points, the full group would gather to discuss all projects with input from students and collaborators welcomed and encouraged to further develop the resources available for the various projects. These half day sessions did much to blur the lines between academia and industry and took the form of design charettes and informal design meetings – round the table, not on the wall – as a break from the traditional ‘crit’ set up within schools of architecture. This was deliberate.
The projects were real, as were the discussions. That’s not to say the architectural critique does not promote ‘real’ discussion and debate. Quite the opposite: they are a fundamental aspect of the education process. But these meetings had a purpose beyond education. They ensured the delivery of an end goal. Discussions held and decisions made had tangible outputs for the projects and valuable lessons were learned. Drawings meant something – time, money, communication. Reality.

Each project worked at a pace appropriate to its individual programme with student involvement encouraged – and supported – across academic recesses and out with timetabled hours. The academic credits were the motivation but not necessarily the drive, and as students began to feel a connection with their project, the desire to remain involved grew.

Mindful of their inclusion within an academic process and the need to allocate grades towards an Honours degree, it was decided that the submission for the Class should, like the Venice Case Study, focus more on the process and less on the output. Students were tasked with submitting their own Project Case Study which would demonstrate their process and involvement throughout regardless of whether the project was or is completed at the point of ‘hand in’. This format begins to imitate the RIBA Part III Case Study which currently forms part of the submission criteria for the Part III exam and develops students’ ability to record and reflect as part of an ongoing process, not merely at the conclusion of one.

The submission of the Case Study – together with an A2 ‘Project Abstract’ to serve as an image bank of the project – allows parity of assessment across a very varied portfolio of project involvement and directs the emphasis away from the ‘product’ of the project (good or bad) and places it on the pedagogic learning.

Summary

What has been created through this Special Study Class is a delicate symbiosis between the industry and the student: the industry is requiring of an informal and temporary resource while the student is hungry for real project experience. The project would not develop without student input. The student would not gain experience without the project. And this – and other new strategies to be developed within the Department – will do much to continue to develop on the principles of the RIBA.

The inclusion of these new strategies within the core curriculum of the Department’s teaching ensures that any collaborative projects taken on shall remain appropriately resourced from start to finish and those students involved will be rewarded with academic credits towards their degree, as well as useful, practical experience towards their chosen career.

This method of academic recognition is established through a harmony between the Design Studio and Special Study Classes with the later picking up where the former leaves off. The seamless integration is reinforced...
further through the continued involvement of the Department’s Design Studio Tutor team which is made up almost entirely by young, dynamic and creative practicing architects whose existing creative liaisons and collaborations have much to offer the Department.

Through ‘live’ build, exposure to ‘real’ clients and an expanding portfolio of ‘real’ projects, the Department of Architecture at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow is promoting creative solutions through new educational strategies to react to an ever-changing profession.

**Collaborators**
Dress for the Weather / FACTORY Architecture / Lateral North / Peter McCaughey / Angus Ritchie / Dan Tyler

**Clients**
The Letter J / Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park / Andrew Miller / Wiston Lodge

**Staff**
Derek Hill

**Students**
Clare Paton / Michael Cockburn / Jonathan Dawson-Bowman / Neal Hemingway / Andrea Hickey / Mark Kitson / Emma Long / Fiona MacGregor / Edita Menciskaite / Paulina Naruseviciute / Kimberley Noble / Laura Petruskeviciute / Michal Supron / Fraser Sutherland / Chloe van Grieken / Jamie Yeo Beo