Architecture as Pedagogy: Alive and Kicking
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integratEd workshop; Queen’s University, Belfast; Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

This workshop draws on an emerging collaborative body of research by Lovett, Morrow and McClean that aims to understand architecture and its processes as a form of pedagogical practice: a civic pedagogy.

Architectural education can be valued not only as a process that delivers architecture-specific skills and knowledges, but also as a process that transforms people into critically active contributors to society. We are keen to examine how and where those skills are developed in architectural education and trace their existence and/or application within practice. We intend to examine whether some architectural and spatial practices are intrinsically pedagogical in their nature and how the level of involvement of clients, users and communities can mimic the project-based learning of architectural education – in particularly in the context of ‘live project learning’.

1. This workshop begins with a brief discussion paper from Morrow that sets out the arguments behind why and how architecture can be understood as pedagogy. It will do so by presenting firstly the relationship between architectural practice and pedagogy, drawing out both contemporary and historical examples of architecture and architects acting pedagogically. It will also consider some other forms of creative practice that explicitly frame themselves pedagogically, and focus on participatory approaches in architectural practice that overlap with inclusive and live pedagogies, concluding with a draft and tentative abstracted pedagogical framework for architectural practice.

2. Lovett will examine practices of architectural operation that have a pedagogical approach, or which recognise within themselves an educational subtext/current. He is most interested in a ‘liveness’ beyond the ‘Architectural Education’ of university institutions. The presentation will question the scope for both spatial empowerment/agency and a greater understanding and awareness of the value of good design when operating as architects with participant-clients younger than 18, older than 25 or across varied parts of society. Positing that the learning might be greatest when there are no prescribed ‘Learning Outcomes’ and that such work might depend on risk-taking and playfulness, the presentation will be a curated showcase drawing on his own ongoing work.

Fig. 1. participants of a briefing, design + construction project, Spain, integratEd workshop

A round table discussion will form the culmination and focus of the workshop following the brief presentations. This hopes to draw on participants views and experiences to enrich the research process. The intention is that the overall workshop will lead to a call for contributors and respondents to a forthcoming publication on ‘Architecture as Pedagogy’.
Civic Fabrication: Urban Futures

Alex MacLaren, RIBA and 2014 MA Architecture students, presented with Rebecca Goodson, MA RIAS award 2014

Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh

Introduction

‘Civic Fabrication’ is a project that tells stories about hypothetical futures of Dalmarnock, Glasgow- an area neglected for years and now in receipt of enormous catalytic regeneration funding as host of the Athletes’ Village for the XX Commonwealth Games. These stories are shared with the local community with the aim of fostering a proactive optimism for the future.

Content

These stories are fabricated by architecture students, who have studied the various scenes, scripts, actors and plot twists (sites, policy, stakeholders and economy), and have developed their stories on this basis. Stories were informed, formed and then reviewed by local residents, explaining to the students their community’s concerns. Some might call these stories ‘Masterplans’, but that gives the impression they are set in stone, which is, we know from past experience, just silly.

The most difficult part of this exercise has been effectively sharing these fabrications with the wider local population. Student work was beautifully drawn, expertly modelled, inspirational, and unpredictable. Community leaders- our contacts in the council, public developer and local architects- found the information exciting and wanted to share these positive forecasts. The value was seen to be especially high as the area has been depressed since its 1950s industrial heyday, and this can impact the general mindset of residents into either apathy or a misplaced longing for the past. Positive ideas for the future are valuable. We had some to share.

But we had concerns. Our ideas were just that- with no clear chance of realisation. How could we make that clear without seeming irrelevant? The last thing we wanted to do was incite mis-placed understanding of development promises; this community has been let down too many times before. We also had to make the work both approachable for the general population and interesting to those engaged- to neither alienate nor patronise. And finally, the remaining local community is tight-knit, with an understandable mistrust of energetic people from ‘outside’, too many of whom have come and gone with
either no effect or worse, damage and broken promises. How to gain trust, when in practice our graduating students were also about to leave for the next stage of their lives?

The conference presentation will discuss the student-led efforts that resulted in a 6-week permanent streetside exhibition hosting 4 weekend ‘live’ events, on site, during the Commonwealth Games, and appealing to local residents. As part of this exercise students also built permanent play equipment for the local adventure playground, and hosted casual drop-in events eating cake and drinking tea/coffee over our huge 2m x 4m model of future scenarios.

Pedagogy

The pedagogic model of this exercise seeks to connect students directly to the area and its citizens. Students are exposed to ambiguity and conflict, and asked to professionally navigate their role between these stakeholders. The tutor enables this communication but does not to pre-empt or impose direction. Students develop their views on the role of the architect.

The project has a long-term social aim in this deprived community. It is hoped this may encourage future engagement in Higher Education and also in public debate surrounding the future of the area.

Can this project succeed in communicating value to both the academe and to local residents/developers? The presentation will reflect on the ‘magic moments’ of success, but also on the failures within the project and navigating the risks, academic and social, of undertaking such a project.

![Fig. 2. Images from one exhibition weekend, including children drawing over the masterplan model; commonwealth athlete cyclists, and a water slide in the adventure playpark.](image-url)
A key partner in this project was Baltic Street Adventure Play, an initiative led by playworker Robert Kennedy and supported by landscaping and architectural engagement by Assemble. Robert’s methodology of working with children to design and giving them ultimate power over the transformation of their playpark space was shocking and inspirational for all of us.

Summary

The points below are key observations and conclusions drawn from our experience during this project. It is hoped that in offering these for discussion and critique this may assist future schools in arranging similar activities.

Briefing

- The academic brief must be re-framed for community participation. Definition should be open enough to allow unforeseen input by user-experts: do no presuppose user requirements or perceptions in the brief.
- Recognise the pedagogic value of input from inexperienced non-architects: ambiguity and contradiction and even friction in disagreement are valuable. Students’ self-awareness and confidence as a designer was ultimately improved by offering them divergent critique, but initially the direct and non-conformist input was a shock, and required tutor support. The learning experience was enhanced but the immediate product suffered. This experience was mirrored by the ‘live build’ part of the project where students designed and built a sandpit collaboratively with playworkers, assemble and local children.
- Clearly define the scope of engagement: what can realistically be achieved, and how that outcome is understood by all involved. A successful student outcome is not a successful community outcome. Poor achievement in an academic forum can be catastrophic for a student, but failure to deliver a promised outcome to a vulnerable user-expert can be extremely damaging to trust and
welfare. This was the most important and also the most difficult point to manage.

Practical considerations

- The physical safety of participants was addressed through routine risk assessments, but the mental impact of this experience on students and on user-experts was more of a concern than had been anticipated. Some students found the local environment to the site unnerving, and found communication difficult. One of the user-experts was similarly uncomfortable and intimidated by their initial visit to the university.

* Site experience showed that physical thresholds were more powerful than had been anticipated. Part of the exhibition could be viewed by passers-by directly next to a narrow footpath: in fact this was the most successful area in engaging people. The covered area, set back from the road but frames with balloons and ‘welcome’ banners, proved to be a powerful threshold that required courage to cross and clearly deterred some potential visitors. Plans to break down the threshold through removing hoarding panels and adding fore- and back-ground balloons as visual links were of limited success.

Communication between students and ‘user-experts’

- Consciously managing space for communication between students and user-experts, and specifically allocating time for non-confrontational communication, and orchestrating this, prior to any direct review of work, was essential. Facile as it may sound, sharing food was incredibly successful in achieving this.

- In this example, the students and visitors to the exhibition had very little in common in the way of shared cultural or life experiences. Casual communication, as was encouraged when discussing the work, was difficult as a result. The students were briefed and encouraged to consider how they approached people, to be open and to use simple non-specialist language. Some found this especially difficult. The student group supported each other extremely effectively in this situation.

- Developing a common language takes time and is best achieved by shared experiences. Repeat visits provided by the students themselves, incorporating this type of activity in any assessed curriculum would be very difficult.

- Finally, the requirements of the academe and of the community were generally divergent. At points throughout the semester, students produced work relevant to either one of the other but seldom managing to excel in both criteria. The lack of clear academic acknowledgement for the community-related successes were particularly galling, especially in communication. Ultimately however, projects from this unit were successful in city-wide and national awards, indicating we hope a movement amongst the architectural profession to place more value in community engagement and social sustainability.

Conclusion

This project enjoyed positive press coverage, received good student feedback and positive reactions from key members of the community. However the author is left feeling there is much to be learned for next time- and extremely glad of the chance (and promise to local partners) to returns to the area in 2015 and 2016 with different student cohorts, reinvigorating existing community relationships and perhaps crystallising our role. ESALA’s position in this is unique- as authors of hypothetical projects we can engage both developer and residents (new and old) and try to develop a shared language in a non-threatening way. We can, I hope, support the local community in understanding what can happen and why, and in somehow taking ownership of that, rather than being lost in the feeling that it’s all happening over their heads. Arts projects in the community can be difficult and can at worst, be damaging, if the students make empty promises then pack up and go
Fig. 4. Visitors to the exhibition and engaging allcomers on the street. Children were invited to add to the urban model

Notes

1 http://www.balticstreetadventureplay.co.uk/
2 http://assemblestudio.co.uk/
project twitter account: https://twitter.com/ESALADalmarnock
project pinterest account: http://www.pinterest.com/edalmarnock/pins/