Introduction

This paper presents a case study of integrating participatory research techniques into design projects in the first year of the Part 2 Architecture course at Northumbria University. It explains the philosophical, pedagogical and pragmatic reasoning behind this. The paper outlines the introduction of participatory research techniques to the students and illustrates three examples of research 'tools' employed by the students at various stages of the design process. It concludes with the author’s observations on presenting the work at the end of the project and receiving feedback from the communities involved.

Background

The Professional Diploma in Architecture at Northumbria University (subsequently renamed Master of Architecture in 2010) was first validated in 2009 during the transitional period leading up to the adoption of the current UK Validation Criteria in 2011. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) used the introduction of the Criteria as an opportunity to require schools of architecture clearly to articulate the “distinction between Part 1 as a first degree and the enhanced standards expected from a higher degree.” (RIBA 2011). In the published Criteria, the “Graduate Attributes” for Parts 1 and 2 “… reflect the differing aspirations and intellectual agendas of part 1 and Part 2 courses.” (RIBA 2011).

The first year of a Part 2 course therefore occupies the curious position of being at the same academic level as the final year of the undergraduate degree (which, under Northumbria University’s regulations, means that work undertaken during this year cannot “count” towards the qualification) and yet the RIBA, as the professional validating body, requires it to reflect Masters level learning.

At Northumbria, that distinction between Part 1 and Part 2 is defined pedagogically as the transition from being taught to self-directed learning at postgraduate level. In architectural design projects this manifests as moving from “problem solving” to “problem setting”; that is, for the student to be able to identify a brief or state a research question, which they then address.

This might sound self-evident, but observation shows that this change in mind-set is not straightforward for the students. Whilst final year undergraduate project briefs do allow some scope for the students to elaborate on a narrative for their project and, perhaps, to choose from a prescribed number of sites, fundamentally the design process is directed towards responding to a brief set by the tutor. Typically this approach is further reinforced by the students’ “year-out” experience. The first year of the Master of Architecture therefore seeks to equip the students to produce an independent final year design thesis. Those who find this transition most difficult frequently, initially complain that they ‘don’t see the point of it’ as ‘Architects just do what their Clients ask them to do.’

An Enterprise Approach

The functions carried out by practising Architects have become increasingly proscribed with specialists, such as Quantity Surveyors, Project Managers and CDM Co-ordinators taking over parts of the Architect’s traditional role. Falling fees and alternative forms of procurement act to squeeze the design period and disincentivise innovation.

The Architectural profession has been slow to apply creativity to solving its own predicament. By introducing the concept of enterprise, through the taught Practice, Management and Law module, the concept of “problem-setting” in the design projects is thus framed; architects do not have to wait for a client. By instigating a project, acting “upstream” of conventional practice, architects can create the conditions for a project and place themselves at the centre of that process.
Obviously this is not without potential financial risks, even merely in terms of the time commitment (but then neither are design competitions). However an enterprise approach is not (necessarily) about speculating to accumulate money, but about making opportunities to do something, which might include making money but may have more altruistic or creative objectives. By creating low-risk opportunities for students to experience acting entrepreneurially they will at least be able to contemplate this as a possibility. Hopefully they will be better informed about the risks they are personally willing to take and able to assess whether the risks are outweighed by the potential benefits.

Contextuality

Students are encouraged to develop authentic briefs and to derive intrinsic design concepts emerging from their research into the context and dialogue with the community or communities.

The ethos of “contextuality” underpins the Architecture programmes at Northumbria University. “Contextuality” is defined in the widest possible sense to mean the social, political, economic and environmental influences on a design. Projects are set that enable repeated and prolonged interactions with sites and for students to become “embedded”.

That approach contains some risks, however. To enable the students easily to access the site they are always within a relatively close proximity of the University. The programme can be accused of parochialism if it is not recognised that this approach can be adapted to different locations and circumstances. In common with “live projects”, it also risks limiting the students’ imagination and aspirations if they merely accept what they learn in and from the community as a given brief, rather than use it critically. As with much that is termed public consultation, it also risks alienating the communities if they perceive that they have given up their time and opinions but received nothing in return.

Participatory Techniques

Public consultation processes, or participatory research techniques, are intended to engage a wider community (often ambiguously referred to as “stakeholders”) with decision-making that, in some way, affects them.

Arnstein (1969) proposed the metaphor of a ladder to describe eight types, or levels, of participation and “nonparticipation”. These descriptions can be useful in designing participatory research projects to frame the level of control and engagement of the “facilitator” and “stakeholder” participants.

| 1. Informing | Methods of questioning controlled with limited options for participants to respond |
| 2. Consulting | Facilitators are given a controlled set of opinions that they are asked to gain from participants e.g. questionnaire. |
| 3. Deciding Together | Facilitators control the consultation process and decide the forms of recording participants’ responses. |
| 4. Learning and Acting Together | The Participants have the power and responsibility for solving problems they chose to tackle |

Table 1. Ladder of Citizen Participation (Serginson et al., 2012)

However, for students’ design projects, we want to collect qualitative data enough to identify and then justify their emerging briefs – but we do not require this to be scientifically rigorous and cross referenced. In the initial stages of “problem setting” at least, we require only an overall impression from a range of, perhaps conflicting, voices.

Participatory research activities, or ‘tools’, are used iteratively throughout the project alongside conventional desktop studies and empirical site investigation. In later stages of the design process they can be used to gain a more detailed or nuanced understanding of a problem, or to get feedback on the direction of work in progress.

Fig. 1. “What would keep you in the Team Valley after 5 pm?” street interviews, Claire Bartlett (2011)
Participatory research techniques are introduced to the students in three ways. Firstly in a workshop supported by a handout. Secondly, in a design charrette, which requires the students to assimilate the contextual knowledge they have already acquired, to act collectively to represent that information and to use it to speculate, then to agree priorities and roles to proceed with the project. Thirdly, by reference to the work undertaken by previous cohorts.

The workshops, led by Ross Mowbray and Catherine Butcher of Participatory Evaluation and Assessment, Newcastle upon Tyne (PEANuT), introduce the concepts and roles in undertaking participatory research and, through short exercises, demonstrate some simple ‘tools’ to gather different types of information. This gives the students a starting point to develop activities which they can then try themselves: not always successfully, but that is also part of the feedback.

Example 1. Questionnaires

The students approached 5 workers and 5 shoppers in each area (different coloured Post ItTM notes indicated where the interview occurred) and asked them to rate Team Valley and its amenities on a scale of 1 to 10. This ranks the strength of feeling. They also asked them to comment “why?” which identified some of the strengths and weaknesses of the area.

The students also asked “What would keep you in the Team Valley after 5 pm?” (fig. 1). This question was particularly useful to the students in identifying a number of common themes – lack of activities, leisure opportunities and entertainment – corroborating some issues which the students had themselves identified.

It has sometimes been possible to ‘piggy-back’ on larger events, such as the Shieldfield Fete organised by Newcastle City Council and the Team Valley Trading Estate (TVTE) Open Day hosted by the TVTE landlords, UK Land Estates.

At Shieldfield, the Fete was organised to support a public consultation process to chose from three (nearly identical) proposals for redevelopment of Shieldfield Green. Using Arnstein’s ladder, this “consultation” merely was tokenism.

Key: indicates the approx. location of the residence of
(A) Amanda, resident 8 years (B) Paula, retired, resident 24 years (C) Nora, historian, resident 32 years (D) George, retired, resident 32 years.

Example 2. Indirect Consultation

The students had observed that the designated social spaces were under-utilised, but a lot of people were sitting on the roadside. One student attached stickers to the kerb with the slogan “I’m sitting on the kerb because…” and received the following answers:

“… it’s quiet”
“… I can smoke”
“… it’s in the sun”

Another group of students experimented with the responses they could get from passing motorists by holding up a sign that read “honk if you love Team Valley”.

“After 10 minutes we got no honks but a few foul words shouted our way.”

Example 3. Mapping

The students asked local residents to draw the boundaries of Shieldfield on a map (fig. 3). All of the residents identified the 1960s Shieldfield Centre complex, housing local shops and healthcare centre with deck-access flats above, as being within the
boundary. The majority of the residents identified the Northumbria University campus (on the site of a former railway goods yard and separated from the road by a 2-3 storey retaining wall) as the west boundary. Most identified New Bridge Street as the southern boundary, although one resident (C) excluded the new student accommodation recently built along New Bridge Street. The northern and eastern boundaries were less clearly defined with most residents identifying the Victorian terraced housing to the north as part of the adjacent, and slightly more affluent, area of Sandyford.

This was informative of the residents’ identification of the area with its’ post-war residential architecture.

potential narratives, uses and interventions in and on your site. At 3 pm you will superimpose your ideas on those of your colleagues’ groups to identify ‘hot spots’ for further investigation. At 4 pm we will discuss as a whole year group any common themes which have emerged from the charrette.

Extract from “Spaces for Ceremony” Brief (2012-13)

Gonzo

The students become active participants in the participatory process, both documenting the results of their ‘tools’ and also documenting themselves doing it (fig. 5) [which we called “Gonzo”, styled after the journalist, Hunter S. Thompson.]

Exhibitions + Feedback

When engaging a group of students with the communities in one geographical area for an extended period of time, it is imperative the students do not just ‘take’ from the community without presenting the conclusions of their work back to the community. Exhibiting the work acts as a celebration of what they have achieved, but it also creates the opportunity to ‘test’ their propositions (out-with the ‘crit’ and its academic setting and language) through a dialogue with the community for whom the projects are intended (fig. 7). This follows the participatory principles of taking the research/ work to the ‘stakeholders’ and explaining its intentions in clear English.

In the projects described above the students’ work has been presented in two types of exhibition. The first mainly presents 2D work for a short duration in an accessible location, for example, at a stall at the Farmer’s Market in Morpeth’s town square (figs. 06 & 07) and at the Team Valley Trading Estate Open Day. These exhibitions have been the most successful at encouraging the students to engage in conversation with the general public about the work.

The second type of exhibition, in more conventional gallery settings, requires a greater amount of organisation and a (modest) budget. They attract a different audience demographic. From a participatory point of view, these have been less successful (although they have had other benefits, for example the “Plug in & Play” exhibition at the London Festival of Architecture 2012 did lead to CV enquiries from local Architect’s practices).
Whilst both types of exhibition have generated some interesting discussions, as they have occurred at the end of the projects, these have not been formally captured. There has also been a degree of ‘opting-out’ by less-engaged students. This is probably inevitable when the exhibition does not form part of the assessment, but does lead to resentment against those ‘not pulling their weight’ and those students also seem to have a less ‘meaningful’ experience.

Conclusion

The examples discussed are necessarily only vignettes, giving a glimpse of one aspect of the first year Part 2 projects which ran between 2009 and 2013. This paper also concentrates on the ‘doing’ of the research, with observations from the students’ design reports and brief reflections by the author. In the spirit of participation, a longer study would seek the views of the students on the roles and efficacy of participatory research in their projects and what they carried forward usefully into their final year design theses. Further research could investigate the role of participation in the design process. This might identify systematically the most effective level of participation at different stages of the design process and which ‘tools’ it is most effective to use.

References