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## 7 Live Projects: collaborative learning in and with authentic spaces

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Live projects are innovative educational practices that enable students to engage in authentic learning outside the physical institution of learning and through working collaboratively with real clients and users. As such they involve project-based learning that takes place in 'real world' spaces with external collaborators and have significant potential as catalysts for inter-disciplinary collaboration. Elements of live project pedagogies have occurred in different disciplines in higher education over many years, in the form of service learning, extension projects, community engagement, design-build, pro bono, clinical and practice learning and 1:1 projects. Examples of several of these approaches can be found throughout this book. This chapter examines space for learning from the experience of architect and design students working on live projects in authentic social spaces. In this context, learning is situated and takes place within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1995) that includes communities and other professional practitioners, along with the students and their tutors.

Since the 1990s live projects have become increasingly significant in architectural education. They are commonly a type of design project situated outside the studio/workshop/

classroom that extends the space for learning allowing students to gain experience of the inherent unpredictability, contingency and complexity of real design projects.

*'A live project comprises the negotiation of a brief, timescale, budget and product between an educational organisation and an external collaborator for their mutual benefit. The project must be structured to ensure that students gain learning that is relevant to their educational development'* (Anderson and Priest, 2014: 13)

This definition was devised to be inclusive of the richness of approaches to live projects and of different disciplines adopting similar approaches. The chapter draws upon analysis and student feedback from twenty-three live projects undertaken by OB1 LIVE, a programme of live projects at Oxford Brookes School of Architecture. It illustrates this with a specific case study that shows how live project strategies and students' learning are influenced by the authentic spaces in which they occur, and explains the subtleties to the nature and function of live projects necessary to ensure that learning is achieved appropriately and ethical responsibilities towards the project's locale and its inhabitants are met. It describes the types of learning made possible by live projects that are difficult to achieve inside walls of the institution and the benefits of external engagement that live projects bring back into their educational institutions.

### **Characteristics of live projects**

The conventional contemporary Western education system, has become accustomed to a model of learning inside fixed institutions that teach learners until, upon graduation, they are deemed ready to join the world of work. Increasingly this is seen as out of step with the requirements of employers, professionals and clients. Live projects seek to redress these shortcomings. They engage in some of the same activities as practice, training and apprenticeship. They take place in the some of the same spaces.

Their learning outcomes and real world experiences are similar to work-based learning but the focus is not on places of employment, but on the project itself and all that its real-world location brings with it. In Live Projects students are the authors and not interns. They are focussed on their responsibilities towards the project, its delivery, its location, and its stakeholders. Although live project activity and outcomes are visible externally, significant

activity such as teaching, reflection, research and support are given by the educational institution to enable live project learning to happen (Anderson, 2014).

The scope of live projects can also include research-based education as long as tutors are explicit about the application of knowledge derived from research to the project or the role of the project in creating new knowledge. Therefore, live projects are in fact located, often simultaneously, in the worlds of education, research, practice and wider society. In a study of live projects in ten different disciplines from business to chemistry (Anderson et al, 2016), five common themes emerged:

- Responsiveness and adaptability
- Community engagement
- Ethics
- Practice and professionalism
- Research and innovation

This chapter will explore these themes through the perspectives of space and place that are fundamental to effective learning from live projects.

### **Spaces where live projects happen**

A single live project normally occurs in several spaces, often simultaneously. This '*dialogue between normally exclusive worlds*' (Rubbo, 2012: 75) manifests itself in the following ways:

- Students maintain a connection with the university during the project in terms of teaching, resources and curriculum. Attempts to describe this symbiotic relationship include 'straddling' (Anderson, 2014: 16) and being on the 'borderlands' (Harriss and Widder, 2014: 1) of the university and the world. Borderland concepts are also explored in chapter 2.
- Both students and tutors bring their own identity and networks into the space where the project will take place, strengthening the partnership where this is needed and improving the university's relationship with the local community, partner or stakeholder
- Some live projects bring the community into the university by hosting activities on campus such as project reviews and exhibitions

- External collaborators often bring expertise that is not available within conventional university structures
- The authenticity and multi-headed nature of live projects enable the integration of learning, teaching, practice, research and community.

### *Temporal spaces*

All space has a temporal quality. Some live projects happen in a space very quickly with great intensity and impact. Others include time for sustained research, planning, observation, immersion, dialogue and reflection. The live project educator must reconcile the needs of the community, the students' need to learn and the structures imposed by the university. University structures normally require that learning be assessed at the end of the learning module in which it was delivered. This doesn't take into account the long-term transformative 'burn' of live project learning where learning may only become apparent in future work. Live projects also benefit from the removal of customary boundaries to enable innovation to happen 'in the present' (Tang and Mitchell, 2016).

Travel between the various worlds of the live project is an important aspect. This includes learning gained from literally or metaphorically getting lost. The images captured from architectural live projects (Anderson and Priest, 2012; Colwill et al, 2014) differ from the customary static images of polished student drawings and models. They communicate celebration of new achievements, freedom from everyday routines, unfamiliar physically and emotionally demanding work in progress, appreciation of time spent with new people, excitement about unfamiliar places as well as respect for the challenges that they face together.

### *Authentic spaces*

Live project literature describes live project learning environments that could be construed as unproductive. They mention words like: risk, failure, chaotic, messy, random, impure, compromising, and uncertain. Equally well-used words include: flexibility, contingency, entrepreneurial, dynamic, resilient and democratic. The first set of conditions needs to exist in order for a project to become necessary. Participants need to experience such authentic

conditions in order to develop the highly desirable qualities of the second list that are so difficult to foster in traditional institutional learning environments.

*'The kind of random encounters and circumstances that make real projects annoying and, well, real, feature prominently in the live project and probably should in a student's educational experience too'* (Raxworthy and Costello, 2012: 43)

### *Social spaces*

In order to meet the ethical requirement to support both students' personal development and address social problems in authentic situations, it is important to establish common ground between different interest groups and individuals. Lave and Wenger's (1995) concepts of communities of practice and of situated learning are very helpful models for this as a mutually beneficial activity. Till advocates architectural live projects as one form of production termed '*Spatial Agency*' (Till, 2012: 8) that involves collective effort in which non-experts play a vital role. Failure to engage the community effectively risks paternalism or the creation of an illusion of consensus that sweeps unresolved issues under the carpet.

### *Public spaces*

Public spaces are of interest to multiple disciplines. They provide live project environments rich in significant global issues. They are contested, contradictory, plural and political and they are simultaneously everyday and event spaces.

### *Private and commercial spaces*

Live projects tend to eschew commercial work for private clients because they stimulate fewer opportunities for collaboration, innovation and learning. Private and commercial spaces lie more comfortably in the realm of the professional and clearly delineated disciplines. However, this can be an asset to live projects exploring professional or disciplinary expertise and high levels of resolution.

### *Places*

Live projects that are very distant from the university physically or culturally and projects that involve a long-term commitment to a particular place are often particularly immersive and intensely engaged with that place, its culture or its people in a way that is rarely feasible in commercial architectural practice. This expands the role of the architect and extends

awareness of the project to a wider audience. Deep engagement with a place can be transformative for the place, its people and the students. Revell describes the benefits of intense engagement with a place as helping to *'develop a stronger educational sense of self, place and commitment to the ultimate sustainable care of our diverse communities and our land'* (Revell, 2012: 123). Sense of self and sense of place are recurrent themes across many chapters in this book.

### **Case study: OB1 LIVE**

OB1 LIVE is a programme of live projects, directed by the author, and undertaken by first year students at the Oxford Brookes School of Architecture. The projects involve external collaborators, normally in the local community, and range from the design and construction of prototypes for a healthcare hub to the design and installation of an exhibition of archaeological artefacts. Since 2008, twenty-four projects have been completed (Anderson, 2008), with external collaborators ranging from a local family centre to the National Trust.

In 2015 OB1 LIVE collaborated with the local Council and a social housing developer to design and build interactive construction site hoardings around a site in Oxford where new housing and a new community centre were being built. The build required the existing local community centre to be closed and part of the local park hoarded off for several months, to create space for the construction of the development. There was concern about disruption to the local community during construction and a wish to encourage the integration of newcomers moving into the area post-construction. Students began by joining local community groups such as the boxing club and bingo, volunteering at places such as the local school or interviewing shopkeepers. They made films, recording what they had learned about the area, its people and their activities. The project architect for the local redevelopment gave a lecture on the design and construction of the new housing and gave the students feedback on their proposals for the construction site hoardings.

The students then designed, built and installed interactive installations along the hoarding adjacent to the playing fields (fig. 7.1). Their brief was to provide a temporary replacement for the community services that were inaccessible during the construction works. These included animal habitats, a vertical garden, play structures, a lending library and a craft

station. The building contractors lent their support by cutting viewing holes in the hoarding in particular locations, according to the students' designs. Construction took place over two days of torrential rain in February. After passing a safety inspection, an opening event was held for local people, the local primary school, the contractors, the developer, local counsellors and county counsellors. Contact numbers and QR codes were fixed to the hoarding to enable feedback and continued dialogue until the installation's planned disassembly in May. This was helpful in alerting students to repairs or replacements needed as a result of general use, bad weather or vandalism. They learned valuable lessons about design in the public realm, such as its tendency to be used in ways that the designers did not anticipate and the level of durability required. It also tested the students' resilience to keep going back and fixing any problems. Some installations became beyond repair and had to be removed after the Easter holidays.



*Figure 7.1: Installation day (Image: Orestes Chouchoulas)*

One of the most successful aspects of this particular project was the visibility and identity that it gave to the broad range of activities happening locally and stimulating new thought about new activities that could happen in the future.



*Figure 7.2: Hoarding installations being used by the community (Image: Jane Anderson)*

Following on from this project, students used what they had learned about the area, the people and the likely effects of the new development to undertake a theoretical project to design an alternative community centre building. The authentic learning that they gathered in the initial 'live' phase of the project had deepened their understanding of these issues. One might expect the negotiation of realities such as rain and vandalism to hamper the creativity of novice designers but an analysis of student feedback given at the conclusion of the module over the last six years reveals that the most consistent, and by far the most frequent, comment unexpectedly links the realities of a live project with creative freedom:



*'Being free to design what you please. Knowing that you are designing for a live project is a nice thought to have as well as makes you want to do your best'*

The OB1 LIVE projects have taken place in some very different spaces. They include museums, charities, public realm and educational, health-care, natural, cultural and commercial spaces. Fifteen projects took place in external spaces, twenty were in Oxford, all were accessible to the public and fifteen of them were accessible for 24 hours per day. From an analysis of the projects, it can be seen that there are three characteristics of the space that have a significant influence on the project strategies, outcomes and therefore on the students' learning experience, namely:

- Accessibility
- Impact
- Accountability

#### *Accessibility*

Given that authentic engagement with the place, its people and their activities is central to the pedagogical strategy of live projects, it is important that access to the site is carefully considered when planning these projects. Students do appreciate how much they can learn when they can engage spontaneously. Positive comments about the choice of site included:

*'being able to see and feel the spaces we were given to change'* (2014)

*'it helped designing for a community that you could interact with'* (2015)

*'I like that we were given a site that is near the Uni, and is a place we can visit whenever we want'* (2014)

In situations where this intimacy and access is not possible, strategies such as immersion and structured follow-up points of contact can work very well in making those rarer moments of engagement valuable by their intensity and focus.

#### *Impact*

Only some of the projects have a permanent construction as their conclusion. Other projects involve the creation of design strategies, prototypes, temporary installations or events. Nonetheless, every project ends with a permanent outcome as a record of the project and its conclusions. These include books, academic publications, films, images,

webpages, construction manuals, press articles, policies and design strategies. External collaborators often use these outputs to gain support, or funding, to move the project into its next phase. The visibility of the project's location and the energetic activity of students in that space, mean that participants are highly conscious of its impact. The visibility, authenticity and public accountability of these projects has a very strong effect in motivating students to test out new skills and venture to carry out unfamiliar actions that they would not normally feel obliged to undertake with such conviction. Phrases that they frequently use to describe their experience include: adapt very quickly, hands on approach, fast learning curve, independent thinking, teamwork, challenging, exciting, communication skills, confidence, time management, try new things.

*'I personally feel like this module immediately plunges us into the world of architecture. As a first year student, I was quite apprehensive and uncertain about what this degree actually consisted of and I found that the design module really allowed me to obtain a better understanding of all aspects of this profession, from analysing the site to pitching an idea to a client' (2016)*

#### *Accountability*

These projects are stimulated by the mutually beneficial needs of all participants who tend to exchange expertise and resources as an alternative to the commercial transaction of professional practice. This means that through a shared goal, students and their external collaborators can develop a dialogue about appropriate ways to transform these spaces. The high levels of expectation and responsibility of the tasks creates a strong sense of accountability that is difficult to simulate in non-authentic situations. Students found fulfilment in having 'contributed to the surrounding community' and another commented that they were:

*'being taught to acknowledge that designing a building is more than just structure and cladding etc, learning to consider the surrounding site, the local community, the movement of people and having a reason for everything you do in the process of design' (2016)*

It also shifted their perception about:

- themselves: *'I'm amazed at the strength of our student community especially with how young it is'*

- their abilities: *'Inspires me to try new things and keep going at my work until it improves'*
- and ways that they could take control of their learning: *'Criticising my own work as well and seeing where my mistakes are'*.

### **Consequences of live project action in these spaces**

#### *Ethics*

Live projects emerge as a response to places where there is a need, a conflict, an injustice or a crisis. The vulnerability of such situations places an imperative to act ethically. Any intervention must be positively transformative and empowering for both the community and the students. The community can never be used as a laboratory to be experimented upon. A heroic and ambitious construction project achieved against all the odds may create a financial drain on the community to maintain it if preparatory projects have not been undertaken to ensure its sustainability.

Most live projects include a direct engagement with a situation, which means that students imbibe the importance of ethical issues in ways that are impossible to teach theoretically or through simulation. In the compelling situation of the live project, issues that seemed irrelevant to students whilst in the university become suddenly urgent when in the field, such as health and safety. The incredible engagement of students in authentic spaces is extremely motivational, enabling, often, wonderful projects and tremendous learning to take place. It is essential that privileged participants are sensitive to the risks of romanticising differences such as deprivation, destruction or ethnicity that they encounter. Charlesworth (2012: 57) recommends *'multidisciplinary design collaborations'* to enable ethical working in such situations. If robust structures are created, the multi-disciplinary and ethical expertise available in a university, as well as its stability and integrity, can make universities bastions to safeguard the ethics of live projects.

#### *Altered hierarchies and structures*

The new and varied spaces of live projects also alter ingrained hierarchies and structures. Students work collaboratively in unfamiliar ways and places. Local community and experts from other disciplines are involved in the process of designing in a way that they rarely are,

and designers are involved in construction in a way that they rarely are. The tutor can no longer be all knowing. Instead they act as collaborator, coach or role model, demonstrating discipline-specific skills. Location in the space of the project rather than hiding it in the design studio, helps to repair the rift between design intent and the lived experience of design decisions. It also makes actions of design more visible to non-designers. The altered structure of live projects breaks down barriers to integration of learning, teaching, research and practice. Altered hierarchies and new locations enable students to perceive their own identity in relation to society in new ways. This has potential for widening participation, internationalisation of the curriculum and other forms of equity.

### *Interdisciplinary collaboration*

Live project collaboration can involve replication of professional multidisciplinary teams and this can be appropriate for projects with very defined outcomes such as the design and construction of a permanent building. However, due to their hybrid identity and tendency towards more exploratory processes, live projects tend to occur in complex and contingent situations with more fluid outcomes and roles. Architectural live project educators record numerous and varied disciplines that they have drawn knowledge from, or collaborated with, such as sociology, business, performance, material science, and law.

Interdisciplinarity enables different disciplines to work together to benefit from the knowledge that others bring; all members retaining and contributing the expertise of their own discipline rather than attempting to become expert in another. In this way complex problems that cross disciplines, such as those concerned with society, nature or new technology, can be addressed more easily. These same types of complex and contingent problems tend to stimulate live projects, often tackling global issues such as urban poverty, climate change or digital innovation at a local level and their connection to applied research and interdisciplinary collaboration creating the capacity to disseminate solutions widely.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that live projects take place, often simultaneously or reciprocally, in the normally disconnected spaces of community, education, research, practice and other disciplines. Their authentic locations vary from project to project and are

a significant influence in forming different live project strategies and, as a result, they are responsive and relevant to the spaces where they happen. Live projects are a device to address problems that are complex, contingent and ill-defined so they tend to happen in spaces where there is a need, crisis, conflict or inequity. These places of adversity stimulate the learning of skills and knowledge that are very difficult to gain institutionally or that are considered to be secondary to the main curriculum such as resilience and entrepreneurialism. In summary live projects occur in authentic spaces, are collaborative in nature and use interdisciplinary expertise that is distributed.

Engagement with those who inhabit and participate in vulnerable spaces brings ethical responsibility. Live projects are innovative because they can alter familiar hierarchies such as the profession, institution, interpersonal, knowledge and society, but live project educators must take care not to increase or create inequality as a result of these altered hierarchies. Collaboration between different disciplinary experts and the stability offered by the educational institution can help to safeguard the ethical conduct of a live project.

The expertise of all live project participants is a vital influence on the evolution of different live project strategies because it can overcome the limitations of a place. The chapter has discussed the diversity of disciplines that are being drawn upon. Conventional disciplinary remits are expanded and awareness of the expertise and activities of others increases. Methodologies from other disciplines are harnessed to address previously intractable problems that cut across disciplinary boundaries and improve the quality of live project outcomes through interdisciplinary collaboration. Live projects address complex problems at a very local level but through engagement with research and interdisciplinary collaboration, solutions can be disseminated at a more global level. At present, greater awareness of live projects are needed across the disciplines in order to generate capacity for broader and better quality interdisciplinary collaborations.

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