

## LIVE PROJECT / DESIGNBUILD EDUCATION.

Creating new connections between universities, communities and contemporary professionalism.



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<https://liveprojectsnetwork.org>

<https://oxfordbrookes.academia.edu/JaneAnderson>

Since the early 2000s increasing numbers of students at UK schools of architecture have been participating in live projects within the community (often referred to as designbuild projects in the USA).

‘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 in Harriss and Widder, 2014, p 13)

Many educators who introduce live projects into the curriculum do so to address issues that they perceive to be neglected, urgent or emergent in contemporary architectural education, in contemporary practice, in society or all of the above.

To promote best practice and to support live project participants, the *Live Projects Network* (LPN) was launched in 2012. Twenty-seven out of the fifty-one RIBA validated schools of architecture in the UK are represented among LPN’s 238 case studies from 85 different educational organisations in 35 different countries across the world. An analysis of 154 of these case studies undertaken in 2016 (Anderson, 2017) tells us more about the nature and consequences of students’ involvement in live projects. The findings that are most relevant to issues of contemporary professionalism are discussed below.

Although a common initial perception is that students in a live project are engaged in some form of proxy-professional practice outside the university, the reality is more complex. Live projects are in fact hybrid entity, straddling practice, community, education and research. They are not a mirror of commercial professional practice. They are collaborative and not-

for-profit in nature, drawing upon the expertise and aspirations of all actors involved - including local people. Students, academics and the local community all learn from each other and from the authentic situation in which the project occurs.

In a live project, working practices tend towards the participatory with academic research, individual expertise and local knowledge informing each other. This connects universities more closely to the communities that they work with both locally and abroad. Live projects are often inter-disciplinary, drawing upon specialist knowledge that is available within a university. These include international development, vernacular, heritage and other forms of cultural expertise; sociological, economic, political, legal and ethical research; cutting edge developments in technology and alternative approaches to practice.

These areas of expertise can be seen in the different aspirations that influence possible live project outcomes. They are:

Professional - where participants wish to explore the potential of new approaches to practice.

Educational - where participants benefit from learning that cannot be experienced within the university.

Social - where participants address or gain understanding of social forces that shape architectural issues.

Design Strategy - where participants bring their creativity and design thinking skills into the real-world to address issues found there.

Design Realisation - where participants employ their making skills and technological expertise to tackle real-world challenges.

Analysis of the LPN case studies shows that there is a lot of live project activity happening in locations neglected by conventional commercial development, such as declining cities and rural areas with scarce economic resources. Isolation, crisis and need (particularly economic, social justice and wellbeing) are common issues that are addressed. Even in areas of privilege, projects were often low cost or offered positive alternatives to prevalent commercial activity, devising responses to issues such as cultural identity, sense of place, equity and engagement.

Whatever the method and outcome of a live project, there is frequent observation by participants of the transformative learning that occurs among its various actors. This learning is essential to the development of contemporary professionalism in two ways:

Firstly, it supports the personal development of individual learners to become professionals. Examples include experience of ethical and financial decision-making, project management, inter-disciplinary collaboration, first-hand construction experience and knowledge of local or international systems regulating practice. This opportunity to work in an authentic situation is embraced by students very enthusiastically because they are able to learn and practice professional skills that are difficult to replicate in the academic design studio. Once understanding is embodied in this way, it is difficult to unlearn and so inevitably informs the students' work when they return to the design studio. It is important to note that this live project situation differs from the familiar apprentice or architectural assistant role found in

practice because the students are the authors of their own live projects. They are supported by their tutors but the tutors do not claim authorship of the project.

Secondly, live projects contribute to the wider development of contemporary professionalism and influence its future direction. They provide a much-needed bridge between research, teaching and practice. Live project methods are often adopted by contemporary practice. For example, through live projects, the latest academic research is disseminated and applied to develop new working practices such as co-creation and inter-disciplinary collaboration. They also provide opportunities for the development and testing of cutting-edge construction technology and advocate the role that design can play in tackling pressing local and global issues to those communities by providing the vehicle to put ideas into practice.



**Interactive construction site hoarding at Northway, Oxford, 2015.** Live project designed and built by First Year students at Oxford Brookes University School of Architecture for use by the local community during the construction of the Northway Community Centre.

### Recommended further reading

Anderson, J. 'Devising an inclusive and flexible taxonomy of international Live Projects', *ARENA Journal of Architectural Research*, 2(1), p. 3, <<http://doi.org/10.5334/ajar.5>>, ISSN: 2397-0820 eISSN: 2397-0820, 2017 (accessed 30 November 2018).

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Dodd, M., Harrisson, F. and Charlesworth, E. *Live Projects. Designing with People*. RMIT University Press, Melbourne, 2012.

Harriss, H., & Widder, L. *Architecture Live Projects: Pedagogy into practice*. Routledge, London, 2014.

Krauss, C., ed. *Designbuild Education*. Routledge, New York and Abingdon, 2017.

Stonorov, T., ed. *The Design-Build Studio: Crafting Meaningful Work in Architecture Education*. Routledge, New York, 2018.