A Live Currency: introducing 'The SSoA Live Projects Handbook'

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Introduction

Live Projects are contingent upon real life situations and so, by their very nature, are complex conditions, offering students rich learning opportunities of a type not generally encountered in the design studio. At Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA), with many years of Live Project experience, we have the opportunity to unpick these complexities and reflect upon the value that Live Projects bring to our students' learning experiences, skills development and employability. An important part of this reflective process is the production of 'The SSoA Live Projects Handbook'[1], a new resource for our students that will demonstrate the value of Live Projects in their encounters with architectural education and practice.

This paper will describe how, through The SSoA Live Projects Handbook, we will make explicit to our students the skills that they develop through Live Projects and the currency of these skills in their ongoing education and future practice as socially-engaged and enterprising architects.

The SSoA Live Projects Handbook will be an important addition to the support we offer our students not only in making the most of the immediate learning that Live Projects afford but also in appreciating their value as critical tools with which to reflect upon their architectural education and their expectations for practice.

Featuring excerpts from the Handbook this paper will describe how involvement in Live Projects has prompted many at SSoA to interrogate the traditional design studio model and the skills learnt there in relation to the distinct nature of the learning environment that Live Projects offer.

Live Projects at SSoA

Live Projects have been core to the curriculum at Sheffield School of Architecture (SSoA) for twelve years and are of key importance to our MArch (RIBA Part 2) and taught masters courses. Their impact is felt well beyond those particular courses, however, and Live Projects have become central to the reputation of SSoA because they embody, demonstrate, develop and disseminate the pedagogical ethos of the school so effectively, exemplifying the importance we place on collaborative, socially-engaged and participatory practice.

Fig. 1. Wincobank Village Hall, SSoA Live Project 2012.

Live Projects at SSoA are fifteen credit modules that run for the first six weeks of every academic year. Groups of students from different years and courses work full-time with client organisations external to the University producing design work that should be of value to the client. We define the projects as 'student-led', placing the responsibility on the students to shape, develop and steer their projects, in direct collaboration with their clients. Members of staff act as observers to the process, offering guidance when necessary as 'mentors', in

contrast to the role of 'tutor' that is usually taken within a design studio.

We actively seek Live Projects that give the students the opportunity to explore agendas of social and environmental sustainability and to initiate creative participation with people in disadvantaged communities. Beyond that the scope and outcomes vary from project to project; some result in actually building something, others are more strategic, proposing visions, participatory toolkits and development frameworks on a building, local, city-wide, regional, national or international scale.

Over the years we have built up an extensive database of student work from 132 projects delivered by approximately 1200 students, the majority are local to Sheffield or situated in other parts of the UK, but many are international projects with students working in or with clients from other countries including Romania, France, Senegal, Zanzibar and Pakistan.

The SSoA Live Project Handbook

Being involved in Live Projects tends to be very fulfilling for all concerned; clients are generally thrilled with the project outcomes, we get positive feedback from our students about their experiences, examiners and validation panels invariably praise the programme. We have worked hard over the years to develop the programme so that the quality of the projects we offer and the framework that supports them have improved year on year. After so many years we have become clearer about how we choose Live Projects, developing a robust network of existing clients and initiating focussed relationships with new clients. We have reached the situation where Live Projects are fully sustainable within the school, attracting excellent students and clients alike.

This extremely positive context has afforded us the opportunity recently to become much more critical of our Live Projects both in relation to the quality of our students' learning outcomes and also in the wider context of current debates in architectural education and practice. We are actively nurturing a culture of critical reflection from staff, clients and students with the express intention of unpicking the complex learning experience that is the Live Project in order to make its impact and effects explicit to a degree that we have not managed before. Having

amassed a huge amount of project material we now feel that it is important to strengthen the research and pedagogical opportunities inherent in Live Projects that up to now we feel has been somewhat lacking in communication and discourse about the subject both at SSoA and other schools of architecture.

The SSoA Live Projects Handbook is specifically set up to aid this process of unpicking and scrutiny and this paper describes how this teaching aid will capture the expertise that we have developed over so many projects into a publication that will benefit our students and staff, develop our methodology further and disseminate best practice to other institutions.

Fig. 2. EcoRoof Paris, SSoA Live Project 2009.

The Higher Education Academy through a Teaching Development Grant is funding the SSoA Live Projects Handbook. Our intention is to make it available to all new students, teaching staff and clients as they embark upon Live Projects. Until now, information on Live Projects for new students has been fairly minimal, with limited information available on the website, knowledge was mostly transferred by word of mouth informally between staff, students and alumni. This was remarkably effective in transferring knowledge and preparing new students for the pragmatics of Live Projects but we felt that it did not communicate the overarching methodology and learning objectives of the programme to the students.

It was this desire to make the methodology and learning objectives of Live Projects more explicit, coupled with a call from the students for better feedback and the nature of our student body changing as it becomes more diverse and international, that prompted the identification of a student handbook as necessary. Beyond the needs of the school there was growing interest from other schools of architecture and from our own University's focus on Live Projects as a good example of civic engagement and encouraging enterprise in our students.

Fig. 3. SSoA Students presenting Live Projects at a civic event 2012

So, the SSoA Live Projects Handbook has been, to a large extent, the recording of all the tacit knowledge that the school has accumulated over the years and is a product of the ongoing debate about the role of Live Projects at SSoA amongst staff and students. It combines a 'how to' guide, a full description of learning outcomes associated with key themes that arise from Live Projects, an explanation of assessment criteria and a listing of formal and informal support, resources and references available in the school and elsewhere. The first draft is now complete and this will be the subject of a number of focus groups of students who have experienced Live Projects, undergraduate students who may do them in the future, should they stay at the school and alumni now in practice.

As more and more schools offer them as part of the curriculum, Live Projects have gained currency as a pedagogical model in contemporary architectural education. The SSoA Live Project Handbook gives us the chance to define the SSoA Live Project in relation to other schools and make explicit why we think Live Projects are important at SSoA, while setting Live Projects within a wider context of learning and practicing architecture now and in the future.

The Handbook should also trigger debate as it inevitably holds a mirror up to other ways of learning architecture in the school, such as the design studio and to other ways of practising architecture that students have and will encounter.

This paper will quote from the Handbook as a project-in-progress with accompanying illustrations also taken from the Handbook. The presentation at the AAE conference will give a more extensive insight into the Handbook than is possible in this format. The paper will also highlight aspects of the handbook that illustrate one of its roles as both complement to and critique of the design studio.

A Live Currency Made Explicit

The SSoA Live Projects Handbook intends to make explicit why we place such importance on Live Projects and why we consider them as useful for our students' learning and future careers in architecture. Equally important is making the processes of Live Projects transparent to the students; our criteria for choosing them, our terms of agreement with clients, the reasoning behind their organisation and their assessment.

This clarity is vital if the students are to value their experience of Live Projects and to appreciate the currency of the skills they learn there as they move into their design studios and then into practice. Until now we have relied perhaps too much upon this understanding being tacit within our students but, on reflection, this privileged our more able students, and now the handbook will ensure that the currency of the skills learned through Live Projects is communicated to all our students, whatever their course, cultural background and ability.

The handbook attempts to give a general definition of Live Projects in contemporary architectural education as follows:

"they connect the world of academia with the 'real' world outside…engaging directly with the complexities of real-life situations as a way of learning and critiquing the theory and practice of architecture"[2]

It then goes on to define Live Projects specifically at SSoA:

"At SSoA we have developed a clear definition of what we mean by a 'Live Project', even though all our projects are different. Connecting them all is the relationship with an external client, their strong participatory nature and their emphasis on the processes of the project as well as its outcomes. The way we do Live Projects at SSoA is closely connected to the way we teach architecture across the school. Live Projects give students the opportunity to explore an architecture that is both socially and environmentally sustainable."

It is important for us to communicate to the students the very particular nature of Live Projects at SSoA so that they understand the connection between the way we teach Live Projects and the ethos of the school. This sets a context for learning that is joined up across modules and courses and which enables students to develop skills in depth.

We identify three types of skills that the students can develop through their involvement in Live Projects:

"Design skills: spatial design, design through construction, writing a report, putting a document together, running participatory events & workshops, making presentations and exhibitions for your design studio.

Management skills: organising a project team, client communication, programming, resourcing, running meetings, managing expectations, delivering on time.

Critical skills: understanding your project in the wider context of architectural education and practice, reflecting upon the impact of the projects on your clients, reflecting upon what you have learnt and drawing out lessons for your design studio."

These key skills are developed through the engagement and exploration of key themes that are inherent in the SSoA Live Projects. We dedicate a sizeable section of the handbook to the consideration of these key themes, highlighting the learning opportunities intrinsic to them.

These key themes include: the social production of architecture, developing 'soft skills', collaborative working, participatory practice, professionalism, the expanded role of the architect, social and environmental sustainability, affecting real communities, policy and people, research by design.

We demonstrate to the students the currency of these skills in their ongoing education and future practice using quotes from employers, clients and ex-students, and locating the skills within a wider professional, economic and political context. For instance in the section 'the expanded role of the architect' we include the following:

"A report published by the RIBA, 'The Future for Architects?'[3] highlights 'pre-project' services as a growth area in the profession. Both public and private sector clients are increasingly aware of the valuable role that community engagement and analysis, brief development, strategic thinking and careful early preparatory work can play in the development of a successful built project. This is an expanding area of work that requires many of the skills that Live Projects develop and you will be well placed to take advantage of opportunities in this area."

In the section 'affecting real communities, policy and people' we quote an ex-student who works with Architecture san Frontières:

"A successful Live Project team enables the client to view their context, both challenges and opportunities, from a different perspective. The team does this by combining their skills, with the knowledge and understanding the client brings, to trigger the process of change their client wants…the big challenge for the group is to achieve a shift in mind-set from that of being a provider to an enabler. - Sarah Ernst (MArch 2010/11)"

In making explicit the learning opportunities intrinsic to Live Projects we are equipping our students with a clear knowledge of what they

can offer employers and clients when they move into practice. We are also raising their awareness of current challenges to the profession and highlighting opportunities where their Live Project-based skills can be useful in meeting these challenges.

Live Projects/Design Studios

Fig. 4. Furnace Park, SSoA Live Project 2013, Reflective Review

The Live Project culminates in two forms of group review. The first is the 'public presentation', a celebratory event for the whole school and clients. Groups are marked according to the clarity and professionalism of their presentation and the quality of the outcomes produced. The second review is the 'reflective review' where groups meet with their mentor and another reviewer and interrogate the processes and outcomes of the project, assessing its challenges, successes and what they might have done better. We actively encourage them to vocalise what they have learnt from the project experience and in the light of this learning reflect upon wider issues in architectural education and practice.

We place a great deal of importance upon the reflective review, giving it 70% of the mark. This weighting signals to the students that critical thinking is a valuable skill, equipping them to be adaptable and resilient in their ongoing studies and in practice beyond. As they move quickly from the Live Project into their design studios they invariably focus this critical thinking upon the differences between the two as illustrated in this poster for an event organised by students on completion of their Live Projects.

Fig. 5. SSoA Lunchtime Specials Poster

The value of Live Projects goes well beyond the benefits they bring to our students' learning because this ongoing debate and reflection is also incredibly useful for us in our teaching. The feedback we get from the students on the relationship between Live Projects and the design studios requires us to keep questioning and developing both.

Distinctions are easily drawn between Live Projects and the design studios; the differing roles of the mentor/tutor, the differing emphasis on process/outcome, the degree to which research content is acknowledged, the balance between group/individual work. In consideration of Live Projects the benefits are too often perceived as being solely vocational and professional, whereas the design studio is too often considered the only place where students can explore a theoretical and disciplinary approach to architecture while honing their design skills.

All too aware of the tendency to polarise discourse on 'Live Projects' and 'Design Studio'[4] we actively seek more creative ways of each informing the other through exploring potential for crossovers in both methodology and pedagogy.

In response to student feedback asking whether their design studio experience could be more 'live', we have for a few years now strengthened the connection between some design studios and 'live' situations. Live Projects in Paris, Pennine Lancashire and Sheffield have been picked up by design studios and evolved into theoretical, ambitious, but still extremely relevant, individual thesis projects [5]. We haven't yet run a year-long Live Project as a design studio where students continue to work on a real brief in collaboration with their client, although we are actively researching possibilities for this for next year.

Emphasising the importance on process in the assessment of Live Projects has led students and staff to question the emphasis we place upon outcomes in the design studio, and vice versa. This has led to discussions regarding how we assess the quality of design work produced amongst the complexities and compromises of a 'live' brief and how we assess the effectiveness of processes generated by an individual student within a hypothetical project.

Year on year we are all learning about the research potential that Live Projects bring, especially when coupled with the longer-term explorations of the design studio. Live Projects generate knowledge through active and situated research, this knowledge can then be developed further in scale and depth in the design studios and then applied back to later Live Projects where the cycle starts again. This realisation has led us to cultivate ongoing relationships with particular Live Project clients, some of whom are ex-students who can then communicate the value of Live Projects to the current cohort.

Conclusion

The SSoA Live Project Handbook is an active tool in the development of Live Projects at SSoA, making the learning opportunities and the skills to be gained explicit to our students but also triggering further debate between staff and students on the role and the future of a 'live' pedagogy.

This process naturally involves scrutiny of the design studio, thereby shedding light on the ways in which the two mechanisms, Live Projects and Design Studios, are already developing in response to each other but also

specifically prompting further questions about the role of each.

Perhaps our attention should turn to the production of a SSoA Design Studio Handbook next…

Notes

[1] 'The SSoA Live Projects Handbook' funded by the HEA through a Teaching Development Grant, due for completion July 2013 and to be published by The University of Sheffield.

[2] Quotes are taken from 'The SSoA Live Projects Handbook' unless stated otherwise.

[3] This refers to 'The Future for Architects?', a report published by RIBA and Building Futures in 2011.

[4] As evidenced in Jeremy Till's keynote speech to the Architecture 'Live Projects' Pedagogy International Symposium at Oxford Brookes University in 2012 where he delivered a polemic on 'live' and 'dead' projects in schools of architecture.

[5] This year, for example, the majority of Live Projects were based in Sheffield and my design studio '5 Live' is developing this situated knowledge and research further into more ambitious thesis projects still in the context of the original client briefs.