

A Taxonomy of Live Projects and Ethical Implications of the University as a Creative Host to Architectural Agency – Summary paper

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Abstract

The varied agendas of Universities (manifested in initiatives such as internships, knowledge transfer, outreach, marketing, and community engagement, alongside the continued agendas of research, assessed modules and qualifications) offer a range of different ways in which live projects can flourish. This paper begins to map a taxonomy of the ways in which live projects can work within (and indeed exploit) the range of initiatives that Universities, as institutions with a complex range of agendas, employ. The paper uses UWE Bristol's live project work as an initial set of case studies and maps seven models of live project practice. These are drawn upon to ask whether it is the complexity of agendas itself that allow Live Projects to flourish in this institutional setting or the University's position as a quasi-public agent, one step outside the commercial requirements of practice that allow it space to make unlikely things live. The case studies are analysed to understand the questions of professional ethics that the relationship between pedagogy, practice, university and client/user raised in each type of project. The open-ended taxonomy of live projects will be presented; and it is proposed that this taxonomy is debated and developed within the conference presentation.

Introduction

'Live Projects are situated not as marginal activities that are nice to do, but as central to the reformulation of the values and methods of mainstream architectural education.' Jeremy Till¹

Live Projects are becoming an established aspect of architectural teaching. Units are being formalised at The Bartlett and Birmingham School of Architecture, joining longer-established practises at Sheffield, Oxford Brookes, Portsmouth and London Metropolitan. This move to legitimate live project work as an aspect of the formal architectural curriculum can be celebrated as an expansion of architectural pedagogy, but one is tempted to look for other reasons why Live Projects might now be so popular.

The University as Creative Host to Architectural Agency?

This paper explores the ways in which live projects can be positioned within the varied agendas of University policies and funded schemes. Initiatives such as internships, knowledge transfer, outreach, marketing, and community engagement, alongside the continued agendas of research,

assessed modules and qualification are capitalised upon to test how the live projects might be positioned, and might even flourish, within. Live projects clearly respond to current University agendas of 'research with impact' and 'regional engagement', however this raises the question of whether a Live Project methodology is simply a convenient route by which architectural academia can find validation within the performance measurements prescribed by University administrators. Alternatively the University could be seen as a creative host that creates a bubble of energy feeding off small pockets of resourcing and funding within the University as well as public need and/or interest in order to catalyse possibilities that seemingly cannot otherwise be unlocked within the public realm.

Alongside this debate, it could be argued that the position of live projects is shifting: from an informal adjunct to the architectural curriculum; to an aspect of the legitimate curriculum. This further raises the question of whether a key quality of Live Project work, as something held at arms-length from University requirements, maverick, and 'under the radar' if you will, might be lost in this move toward legitimacy?

This would seem a good moment to try and understand the nature of Live Projects through the construction of a taxonomy which aims to position different types of live project work in relation to current University policies and the educational and critical intent of the projects (for example the relationship to architectural practice, relationship to stakeholders, approach to knowledge, ethical implications and project legacy).

Methodology

Projects from UWE Bristol's live project work are used as case studies from which to generate an open-ended taxonomy of live projects. The taxonomy attempts to classify projects under the following areas:

PROJECTS TYPES – Professional agency; Festival; Advocacy; Knowledge sharing; Feasibility; Competition; Community consultation; Self build...

EDUCATIONAL/CRITICAL IMPLICATION - relationship to architectural practice; relationship to stakeholders; approach to knowledge...

LEGACY – Physical; Cultural; Social; Discursive

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS – exploitation of students/University host/tutors; 'stealing' work from practice; misleading communities; minimised opportunities for risk taking; quality of work left behind...

Conclusions

The paper concludes that even in a neo-liberal market approach to Higher Education small pockets of money, resourcing & time (which is expressed financially by the University) can be found to fund activities outside the University. The taxonomy highlights the fact that the utilization of these pockets of support does however tend to imply certain educational and critical positions. These can be seen on a continuum, from a mimicry model of learning from practice to models of parallel practice; from affirmation of accepted modes of practice to challenging practice with an alternative form of agency; from applying existing knowledge to generating new knowledge. The projects can also be understood as having differing forms of legacy. These might be physical (permanent or temporary); cultural (A small part in a longer-term relationship or project or a single stand-alone moment); Discursive (establishing a place in an ongoing public conversation); Social (creating new connections between individuals, groups, students and tutors).

The taxonomy implies a hierarchy in the educational and critical implications of the projects clearly highlights the inherent implications in engaging in different aspects of 'live-ness'. It begins to suggest the different motivations for 'liveness' and how they might most appropriately operate and different stages of architectural education.