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Civic Fabrication : Urban Futures

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Introduction

'Civic Fabrication' is a project that tells stories about hypothetical futures of Dalmarnock, Glasgow- an area neglected for years and now in receipt of enormous catalytic regeneration funding as host of the Athletes' Village for the XX Commonwealth Games. These stories are shared with the local community with the aim of fostering a proactive optimism for the future.

Content

These stories are fabricated by architecture students, who have studied the various scenes, scripts, actors and plot twists (sites, policy, stakeholders and economy), and have developed their stories on this basis. Stories were informed, formed and then reviewed by local residents, explaining to the students their community's concerns. Some might call these stories 'Masterplans', but that gives the impression they are set in stone, which is, we know from past experience, just silly.

The most difficult part of this exercise has been effectively sharing these fabrications with the wider local population. Student work was beautifully drawn, expertly modelled, inspirational, and unpredictable. Community leaders- our contacts in the council, public developer and local architects- found the information exciting and wanted to share these positive forecasts. The value was seen to be especially high as the area has been depressed since its 1950s industrial heyday, and this can impact the general mindset of residents into either apathy or a misplaced longing for the past. Positive ideas for the future are valuable. We had some to share.

But we had concerns. Our ideas were just that- with no clear chance of realisation. How could we make that clear without seeming irrelevant? The last thing we wanted to do was incite mis-placed understanding of development promises; this community has been let down too many times before. We also had to make the work both approachable for the general population and interesting to those engaged- to neither alienate nor patronise. And finally, the remaining local community is tight-knit, with an understandable mistrust of energetic people from 'outside', too many of whom have come and gone with



Fig. 1. Street Frontage of Student-Designed Exhibition, Dalmarnock Road, Glasgow

either no effect or worse, damage and broken promises. How to gain trust, when in practice our graduating students were also about to leave for the next stage of their lives?

The conference presentation will discuss the student-led efforts that resulted in a 6-week permanent streetside exhibition hosting 4 weekend 'live' events, on site, during the Commonwealth Games, and appealing to local residents. As part of this exercise students also built permanent play equipment for the local adventure playground, and hosted casual drop-in events eating cake and drinking tea/coffee over our huge 2m x 4m model of future scenarios.

Pedagogy

The pedagogic model of this exercise seeks to connect students directly to the area and its citizens. Students are

exposed to ambiguity and conflict, and asked to professionally navigate their role between these stakeholders. The tutor enables this communication but does not to pre-empt or impose direction. Students develop their views on the role of the architect.

The project has a long-term social aim in this deprived community. It is hoped this may encourage future engagement in Higher Education and also in public debate surrounding the future of the area.

Can this project succeed in communicating value to both the academe and to local residents/developers? The presentation will reflect on the 'magic moments' of success, but also on the failures within the project and navigating the risks, academic and social, of undertaking such a project.



Fig. 2. Images from one exhibition weekend, including children drawing over the masterplan model; commonwealth athlete cyclists, and a water slide in the adventure playground.



Fig. 3. Construction of the sandpit at Baltic Street Adventure Play

A key partner in this project was Baltic Street Adventure Playⁱ, an initiative led by playworker Robert Kennedy and supported by landscaping and architectural engagement by Assembleⁱⁱ. Robert's methodology of working with children to design and giving them ultimate power over the transformation of their playpark space was shocking and inspirational for all of us.

Summary

The points below are key observations and conclusions drawn from our experience during this project. It is hoped that in offering these for discussion and critique this may assist future schools in arranging similar activities.

Briefing

- The academic brief must be re-framed for community participation. Definition should be open enough to allow

unforeseen input by user-experts: do not presuppose user requirements or perceptions in the brief.

- Recognise the pedagogic value of input from inexperienced non-architects: ambiguity and contradiction and even friction in disagreement are valuable. Students' self-awareness and confidence as a designer was ultimately improved by offering them divergent critique, but initially the direct and non-conformist input was a shock, and required tutor support. The learning experience was enhanced but the immediate product suffered. This experience was mirrored by the 'live build' part of the project where students designed and built a sandpit collaboratively with playworkers, assemble and local children.

- Clearly define the scope of engagement: what can realistically be achieved, and how that outcome is understood by all involved. A successful student outcome

is not a successful community outcome. Poor achievement in an academic forum can be catastrophic for a student, but failure to deliver a promised outcome to a vulnerable user-expert can be extremely damaging to trust and welfare. This was the most important and also the most difficult point to manage.

Practical Considerations

- The physical safety of participants was addressed through routine risk assessments, but the mental impact of this experience on students and on user-experts was more of a concern than had been anticipated. Some students found the local environment to the site unnerving, and found communication difficult. One of the user-experts was similarly uncomfortable and intimidated by their initial visit to the university.

* Site experience showed that physical thresholds were more powerful than had been anticipated. Part of the exhibition could be viewed by passers-by directly next to a narrow footpath: in fact this was the most successful area in engaging people. The covered area, set back from the road but framed with balloons and 'welcome' banners, proved to be a powerful threshold that required courage to cross and clearly deterred some potential visitors. Plans to break down the threshold through removing hoarding panels and adding fore- and back-ground balloons as visual links were of limited success.

Communication between Students and 'User-Experts'

- Consciously managing space for communication between students and user-experts, and specifically allocating time for non-confrontational communication, and orchestrating this, prior to any direct review of work, was essential. Facile as it may sound, sharing Food was incredibly successful in achieving this.

- In this example, the students and visitors to the exhibition had very little in common in the way of shared cultural or life experiences. Casual communication, as was encouraged when discussing the work, was difficult as a result. The students were briefed and encouraged to consider how they approached people, to be open and to use simple non-specialist language. Some found this especially difficult. The student group supported each other extremely effectively in this situation.

- Developing a common language takes time and is best achieved by shared experiences. Repeat visits provided by far our most successful conversations. Documents and photographs brought by visitors on their return provided a more balanced relationship of 'show and tell'.

- The use of a model and of perspective views were invaluable in communicating design ideas to community members where orthogonal drawings failed to engage.

Deliverables and 'measuring success'

- The biggest challenge throughout was articulating to community visitors the reason for our exhibition. On hearing that the projects were 'only ideas' and had no formal backing, the common reaction was "well, what's the point then?" We remain convinced of the value of suggesting feasible and imaginative solutions, and of engaging local children in this dialogue with Higher Education, but that value has not been seen by some visitors.

* The public community-facing part of this project was conducted outside of semester by volunteers and had no bearing on student assessment. The uncertainty of what could be achieved, of the public reception or popularity of the project, would provide a very high degree of unmanageable risk when trying to articulate any formal assessment criteria. Despite offering an extremely valuable learning experience, as evidenced by feedback from the students themselves, incorporating this type of activity in any assessed curriculum would be very difficult.

- Finally, the requirements of the academe and of the community were generally divergent. At points throughout the semester, students produced work relevant to either one of the other but seldom managing to excel in both criteria. The lack of clear academic acknowledgement for the community-related successes were particularly galling, especially in communication. Ultimately however, projects from this unit were successful in city-wide and national awards, indicating we hope a movement amongst the architectural profession to place more value in community engagement and social sustainability.

Conclusion

This project enjoyed positive press coverage, received good student feedback and positive reactions from key members of the community. However the author is left feeling there is much to be learned for next time- and extremely glad of the chance (and promise to local partners) to return to the area in 2015 and 2016 with different student cohorts, reinvigorating existing community relationships and perhaps crystallising our role. ESALA's position in this is unique- as authors of hypothetical projects we can engage both developer and residents (new and old) and try to develop a shared language in a non-threatening way. We can, I hope, support the local community in understanding what can happen and why, and in somehow taking ownership of that, rather than being lost in the feeling that it's all happening over their heads. Arts projects in the community can be difficult and can at worst, be damaging, if the students make empty promises then pack up and go

home. So we're around for a longer haul- building relationships- making no promises at all, but hopefully enabling conversations and empowering residents a bit.

Notes

ⁱ <http://www.balticstreetadventureplay.co.uk/>

ⁱⁱ <http://assemblestudio.co.uk/>

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t: 07779 254 775

project twitter account: <https://twitter.com/ESALADalmarnock>

project pinterest account:
<http://www.pinterest.com/edalmarnock/pins/>

local media interview:
<http://www.citizen2014.net/2014/07/31/video-destination-dalmarnock-rebuilding-a-community-after-the-games/>



Fig. 4. Visitors to the exhibition, and engaging allcomers on the street. Children were invited to add to the urban model.