

## Project Office; Unleashing a 'Force for Good'

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### Abstract

In 2013 The Leeds School of Architecture (LSA) at Leeds Beckett University (LBU) launched Project Office (PO), defined as 'a design and research collaboration of staff and students. It is an architecture consultancy concerned with ethical, social and resilient architecture and design. We work with like-minded communities, organisations and individuals' (Warren and Stott, 2014).

PO has 12 'Rules of Agency', which are expounded in this paper to demonstrate its ethical principles and how to occupy a space concurrently within the academic institution and architecture practice. These are:

- To be ethical
- To be environmentally resilient and informed
- To advocate participatory design methodologies for staff, students and collaborators
- To working only with clients who lack financial means to realise their projects
- To generate research impact through practice related research output
- To create opportunities for student engagement with a range of educational and formative experiences
- To comply with established ARB and RIBA validation criteria and EU directives for architectural education
- To develop architectural pedagogies
- To cause the production of architectural live projects as defined by Anderson and Priest (2016)
- To express the contribution of students as a *force for good*.
- To have fun
- To cultivate a space for an inclusive and virtuous practice that is inspiring for all participants

The paper asserts that the Practice-Related Research at the core of PO's work has a significantly positive social impact. It argues that educators of prospective architects have a societal responsibility not only to expose students to the social impact of their practice but also to make it the heart of pedagogic purpose. PO achieve this despite the changes witnessed in universities, where neo-liberalism defines their trajectory, having found a way to exist that puts a value, 'a sense of care' (Mountz, et al., 2015) on all people collaborating with students, work colleagues, stakeholders, clients and also ourselves.

Keywords: Live Project Pedagogy, Practice Related Research, Learning through Play, Architecture, Engagement

### Introduction

PO is a virtuous learning environment for students at Leeds Beckett University. Its method is the architecture live project.

This paper reflects on its 12 Rules of Agency conceived (originally in 2013 and modestly revised in 2016) to delineate the activity of PO's practice related research. Collectively they embrace a pedagogic principle whereby the student cohort is regarded as a *force for good*.

PO can validate the *force for good* through its range of student led physical outputs for the community - self-builds, design guides, buildings, community consultations, sketch designs, pop-ups etc.

We also propose that virtuous learning environments are beneficial for our wellbeing as academics. The increasing effect of the neo-liberalisation of our universities places stresses on academic life - less time, more to do, the measuring and judging of everything, so undermining our goodwill, spirit and creativity. 'We find that these often overwhelming demands exact an isolating psychic and physical toll that is neither reasonable nor sustainable' (Mountz, et al., 2015). They express their opposition to this by calling for a 'slow scholarship' as antidote. 'Slow scholarship' resonates with live project pedagogy which requires the same *space* (time) and *collaboration* (support) of all players.

Is PO's method a 'slow scholarship' resistance at our university? Through its collaborative and virtuous environment we feel that we are able to challenge counterproductive 'working conditions' by fostering a 'sense of care' for colleagues that participate with us. 'Slowing down involves resisting neoliberal regimes of hurried time by working with care while also *caring for ourselves and others*.....Slow scholarship has value in itself, in the quality of research and writing produced, and also enables us to create a humane and sustainable work environment and professional community that allows more of us to thrive within academia and beyond' (Mountz, et al., 2015).

### Project Office

Live projects have a long but low-key tradition in UK Schools of Architecture, and have seen resurgence over the last decade at some institutions. LBU is one of them; from late 2009 architecture live projects developed from extra curricular incidents to become embedded in the architecture courses, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

A significant distinction is that we have also set up a *project office*, the common term in the UK for institutional architectural consultancies. These are architectural practices that can provide the same range of services as conventional ones. It provides professional architectural services, which cannot directly be undertaken by students, such as the management of construction contracts, compiling tender documents, building regulation applications and grant applications etc. The role of a *project office* is to give technical and academic support and direction to a live project programme.

Project offices are uncommon and although it is not certain, because others may be emerging, there are just four fully-fledged projects offices in the UK. Therefore it is important that project offices clearly define themselves within their institution, the architectural community and the communities that we work with. PO's *12 Rules of Agency* attempt to do this.

### The 12 Rules of Agency

#### Rule 1 - To be ethical

For the writers, *to be ethical* can only be explained as a tacit understanding that comes from a long way back and frames our relationship with the world. We *were* ethical before we were *architects*. We aim to use architecture live projects as a means of ethical

investigation and insight for our students. Architecture has an ethical dimension, which is not only marginalised in the real world, but in our experience, it is also frequently disregarded in architectural education.

The architect Herman Hertzberger explains, 'Architecture, indeed, everything that is built, cannot help playing some kind of role in the lives of the people who use it, and it is the architect's main task, whether he likes it or not, to see to it that everything he makes is adequate for all those situations. It is not only a matter of efficacy in the sense of whether it is practical or not, but also of whether what we design is properly attuned to normal relations between people and whether or not it affirms the equality of all people. The question whether architecture has a social function is totally irrelevant, because socially indifferent solutions simply do not exist; in other words, every intervention in people's surroundings, regardless of the architect's specific aim, has a social implication. So we are not in fact free to go ahead and design exactly what we please – everything we do has consequences for people and their relationships.' (1991)

We view the real world setting of the live project as a rich ethical and social territory to encounter clients, people, politics, environments, ecologies, sustainability etc. Live projects enable the student to begin to situate his or her relationship to society with regard to the consequence of his or her future standing, that of an architect.

#### Rule 2 - To be environmentally resilient and informed

In 1987 the Brundtland Commission provided a benchmark definition of sustainable development, 'Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The response to energy depletion and climate change will shape the quality of our future on the planet.

Architectural education is focused on a hypothetical and artificial situation where tutor and student speculate about our designed future. Invariably issues of sustainability, climate change, energy depletion and ecology are genuinely aired. The problem is that these are always fictitious and untested, and typically good ideas are simply lost.

The architecture live project has no option but to confront the reality of the environment because it is *real*, it can contribute positively or negatively. As Thomas Sigsgaard stated, 'The most sustainable way is to not make things' (The Sustainability Cooperative). Students are burdened with the probability that their architecture will have a negative contribution; CO2 emissions, material choices, embodied energy, affects on existing ecology, energy usage, waste etc. Architecture live projects expose students to a complex reality, and charge them with designing responsibly.

**Rule 3 - To advocate participatory design methodologies for staff, students and collaborators**

PO considers the role of the architect in society, which is becoming evermore complex and global - facing challenges of the widening gap between the rich and poor, of energy depletion and climate change, new technologies etc. We need effective methods of *practicing* that can respond appropriately. In its practice PO has found that participatory design techniques have been the most successful means so far of executing its work.

'Participatory Design is about negotiating values - a "moral proposition" (Carroll & Rosson, 2007) realized through participation. Values in the design process is seen as an ethos that respects people's democratic rights (Ehn, 1993) in that the people whose activity and experiences will ultimately be affected most directly by a design outcome ought to have a substantive say in what that outcome is.' (Iversen, et al. 2010).

The orthodox method of teaching at Schools of Architecture is within the *design studio* where the singular designer is raised upon a pedestal, a notion that is fixed by the time students enter architectural practice. Participatory design is an oppositional approach and is able to illustrate that there are other ways of doing architectural education.

Architectural educator Jeremy Till reasons for a change too, 'a move from the idea of an architect as expert problem-solver to that of architect as citizen sense-maker; a move for a reliance on the impulsive imagination of the lone genius to that of collaborative ethical imagination, from clinging towards notion of total control a relaxed acceptance of letting go.' (Awan et al., 2011)

Architectural education and the media, has for far too long upheld the exceptional individual as virtuous, celebrating *starchitects* such as Zaha Hadid

and Frank Gehry. Our students are drawn in to their emulation, but reality is markedly different, Tom Spector estimates 'more than 100,000 decisions go into the design of an average sized building' (2001); it is quite obvious that architecture is an immense collaborative exercise.

Through participatory design, the architecture live project embodies the *authenticity* of real life practice and immerses students into the community of architectural production alongside their student colleagues, their tutors, their clients, users and other technical co-workers.

**Rule 4 - To working only with clients who lack financial means to realise their projects**

PO's clients have a lack of wealth in common. This means that they cannot engage architectural professionals in the normal way of a commission. PO is able to undertake projects where there is no viable means of payment because it has the student body as its resource; no fiscal means are required. However, there is a currency exchanged for the students' work, which is the *credit*, the standard means of measuring achievement at universities. This is PO's distinctive model, to monetise the university currency, so that student contributions to projects are recognised as an exchange of labour.

Our pedagogic motivation is to foster students' socialisation in the real world through engaging with projects that are driven by the needs of communities, exemplified by work with clients that have the most need and least means. This is so that students can understand the privilege of their situation, their value to society and the value of their labour, so that hopefully, in the future they will continue *doing good* with their expertise and carry on being a *force for good*.

**Rule 5 - To generate research impact through practice-related research output**

The conference title situates *value and virtue* in the territory of *practice based research*. PO's research is *practice related* i.e. both *practice based* and *practice led* as defined by Linda Candy. (2006)

1. If a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is *practice-based*.
2. If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is *practice-led*. (Candy, 2006)

At LBU, academics are already mobilising towards Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2020. Project Office sees its submission having a significant impact. As defined by the 2014 REF 'Impact was defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'.

(<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/>)

To date we haven't explicitly described the impact of PO's live projects, and neither are we clear as to how to measure it, but all the above themes can be evidenced or have the potential to be evidenced.

**Rule 6 - To create opportunities for student engagement with a range of educational and formative experiences**

The architecture live project learning environment is located between the academy and the real world which gives rise to the potential for varied learning experiences. Once the binary relationship of tutor and student is redefined through the addition of the client, all kinds of opportunities arise.

In Sara's live project work 'students developed a range of attitudes and skills that can be seen to enrich, critique and develop those found in traditional academic work... Students were actively engaged in an integrative learning process, which should result in 'deep' learning.'(Sara, 2011)

The student is immersed in a new kind of learning environment that is *real* - skills of diplomacy and compromise, management of budgets, time constraints etc. and the favourite of live project educators, reacting to the unexpected provides the student with opportunities to develop essential competences often overlooked in architectural education. And through PO's academic responsibility there is encouragement for students to experiment and reflect on their actions and learning.

**Rule 7 - To comply with established ARB and RIBA validation criteria and EU directives for architectural education**

Architectural education in the UK is externally prescribed and validated by ARB and RIBA respectively. As such live projects, which can be applied across all course modules (Design Studio, Technology, Professional Studies and Context Studies being the norm) must be capable of being mapped (evidenced in the University's Module

Approved Template) against the EU directive of 11 General Criteria.

Our experience is that live projects reside very well within the normal structures of architectural education because of the broad range of learning outcomes they are able to generate. At LBU we tend to situate the live project in Design Studio, an environment where learning is achieved through the setting of design problems to elicit a design solution. At the time of writing, we are working towards Project Office having a role in the delivery of Professional Studies and Technology modules in the next academic year.

**Rule 8 - To develop architectural pedagogies**

Simon Warren is undertaking a research degree that explores the potential of live projects as a vehicle to enquire into alternative models of architectural education and practice.

One objective is to situate live projects at LBU in a critical pedagogic context. In 'A critique of the live Project', James Benedict-Brown, one of a very few live project theorists concludes that live projects are complex pedagogies, 'These are pedagogies that recognise both the (complicated) individual learning processes of an educational encounter and the (holistic) social, cultural and historical situatedness of that encounter' (2012).

As Warren's thesis progresses its position on and knowledge of teaching methods can be rigorously tested and adjusted appropriately through the LBU live project programme.

**Rule 9 - To cause the production of architectural live projects as defined by Anderson and Priest**

'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, 2016)

Project Office has completed or is involved with 15 live projects. Rather than remain as theoretical paper exercises, as orthodox design studio would, the student endeavour makes a meaningful contribution to the lives of others outside of the academy.

This output includes the £550,000 New Wortley Community Centre, Morley Newlands Primary

School Playscape - a design and construct playground, The Film School design guide at LBU, Basement Arts – design ideas for the reimagining of a domestic basement as an art space and a prefabricated interior office space design and construct project for food recycler Fareshare.

'Live projects achieve straightforward meaningful contributions (physical or otherwise) to our communities and built environment. In every school of architecture the one resource we have in abundance is the student, this can be harnessed as a force for good.'(Warren 2014)

**Rule 10 - To express the contribution of students as a force for good.**

By articulating student contributions as a *force for good* we can convey to our students, academy and communities the virtue and impact of their collective action.

'The overarching pedagogical value of live projects is their potential impact as a force for good. Live projects equip students to make informed choices about the kind of architect they would like to be; particularly in raising the issues of their position regarding social responsibility.'(Warren 2014)

It is important to keep restating this to students; by doing so they start to absorb and appreciate the part they have played in the production of courageous, meaningful, collaborative and transformative work.

**Rule 11 - To have fun**

'The neoliberal university requires high productivity in compressed time frames' and 'good scholarship requires time to think, write, read, research, analyze, edit, organize, and resist the growing administrative and professional demands that disrupt these crucial processes of intellectual growth and personal freedom.'(Mountz et al)

These are recognisable impediments to the academic's ability to maintain high quality education and good student experience. They are also a hindrance to having *fun*.

During the period of writing this paper the UK voted to leave the European Union in the referendum on June 23rd 2016. The uncertainties this is also bringing can only further erode student and academic experience that is already under strain from the neo-liberalisation of educational organisations. Institutional and EU research funding

is under threat and the potential end of the free flow of overseas students and staff coming to the UK is unsettling.

One of the reasons that we decided to initiate live projects and to set up PO was that we felt that something was missing from our working relationships. We felt that our linear deployment and individual research interests lacked social opportunity and spontaneity, and put simply having *fun*. When we advocate having fun, we mean fun for ourselves, for students and our collaborators.

We are encouraged by the paper 'For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University' (Mountz et al) and how as a collective of like-minded academics we can repair against adverse cumulative changes. Has PO found its way through advocating having fun and cooperation, that places a value, 'a sense of care' (Mountz, et al., 2015) for all involved? The live project through its impulse of gathering to do something 'good' rouses the spirit and builds friendships. It is a 'social' act and this engenders 'fun'. It is our responsibility as live project educators to champion this.

**Rule 12 - To cultivate a space for an inclusive and virtuous practice that is inspiring for all participants**

Through architecture live projects PO has created an inclusive learning environment that has fostered collaborative work with landscape architecture, product design, cultural studies and graphic design colleagues and students. PO has created an external impact, particularly within the Leeds city region.

We believe that we have a responsibility, particularly in this unpredictable world, to support students in their cultivation of a virtuous and participatory outlook to society. Our way is to achieve this through *doing* as a collective, and to have *fun* and *care* as we *do*.

Consider this, there is so much that needs doing in the world. Students through their productive endeavour have always achieved meaningful contributions to society. Can we make this even more the focus of pedagogic purpose? Students are the one resource that universities have in abundance; could this student workforce be fully mobilised as a collective *force for good*?

## Conclusion

Over three years PO has embedded a well-regarded learning environment within the School of Art, Architecture and Design (AAD) at LBU. We are thinking about the next three, this paper's Rules of Agency being a starting point for discussion and expansion. We are beginning to see disciplines other than architecture become involved which fits with the School of AAD's ambition for more crossovers between courses. We have set up a steering group

of internal and external critical friends. The group's aims are to give strategic direction and develop and maintain a set of project *principles and goals*. We have started exploring opportunities through architectural competitions with LBU alumni, something we think is rich in possibilities.

Live projects are by definition 'live'. We are accustomed to being fleet of foot, adaptable and open. Our 12 rules of agency share these traits, how might they change in the next three years?

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