



Somerstown Stories and the benefits of using a design charette for community engagement

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Abstract

Somerstown Stories was a local heritage project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, collaborating initially with Somers Park Primary School in Somerstown, within the City of Portsmouth. The aim of the project was to enable people to reconnect with their locality by exploring local history. In addition, the project explored the question: does knowing more about where you live change how you feel about living there? At the time of the project, the area of Somerstown was at the beginning of a process of phased redevelopment, so it was timely for local groups and organizations as a whole to look back at their history and the shaping of the area, in order to prepare to look forward and plan for the future. As part of the larger Somerstown Stories project, the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture was invited to coordinate a design charette for Year 9 students from the local Charter Academy School. This paper explores the nature of the charette, and its value in engaging different stakeholders. The paper is written using commentaries, conclusions and reflections from the key people involved with this project, including Canon Nick Ralph from the Diocese of Portsmouth; Sharon Court, Creative Practitioner and Project Manager for the Somerstown Stories project; Martin Andrews, Architect and Principal Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture; and Andrew Joyce, a University of Portsmouth student at the time of the design charette and now a registered architect working at ArchitecturePLB in Winchester.

Keywords: creativity; architecture; charette; local residents; urban; engaged learning; student engagement; reflective practice

Key messages

- This project indicates the value of involving higher education students with access to socially driven projects.
- There are benefits to be derived from working with 'real' clients on 'live' projects within a higher education environment.
- There are advantages to developing open and collaborative relationships outside of the higher education sphere, allowing non-academics input into academic projects.

Introduction

Somerstown Stories was a local heritage project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, collaborating initially with Somers Park Primary School in Somerstown, within the City of Portsmouth.

This project, commencing in September 2011 and concluding in January 2013, was launched in Somers Park Primary School with a six-week scheme of work looking at the Somerstown locality from the 1800s to the 1970s. This work included a series of studies focusing on the significant effect of the Second World War on the area. Like many local authorities across the United Kingdom, Portsmouth Corporation decided on a policy of slum clearance and regeneration after the war, which resulted in the area we know today. This post-war reconstruction process meant that a large number of the local community were relocated to new areas, while those moving in to the new flats and tower blocks had little or no connection to the area. In addition, Somerstown was bisected into two distinct neighbourhoods by Winston Churchill Avenue, a dual carriageway. This further contributed to the disintegrating sense of community and connection. The aim of the Somerstown Stories project was to enable people to reconnect with their locality by exploring local history. In addition, the project investigated an underlying question: does knowing more about where you live change how you feel about living there?

At the time of the project, the area of Somerstown was at the beginning of a process of phased redevelopment, so it was timely for local groups and organizations as a whole to look back at their history and the shaping of the area, in order to prepare to look forward and plan for the future.

The Somerstown Stories project was successful in a bid to secure funding of £20,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund; this funding enabled the wider community work to commence. With successful partnership collaboration, over a period of 18 months a significant amount of work was accomplished across the area, including the design and curation of a mobile exhibition, film screenings, publication of a book and a community roadshow. One significant anecdotal outcome was the impact it had upon local residents' perception about the way they viewed and understood the place in which they lived.

Background

As part of the larger Somerstown Stories project, the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture was invited to coordinate a design charette for Year 9 students from the local Charter Academy School.

Charrette is a French word meaning 'little cart', although it can also mean 'working against the clock'. The official Larousse definition of *charrette* is 'a two-wheeled vehicle pulled by animals', but the word has entered into colloquial French to mean an intensive work session to meet an urgent deadline. The name is taken from the nineteenth-century French School of Beaux Arts, where architecture students would put their exam work in a cart at deadline time. Students would often jump on to the cart to put finishing touches to their presentations, charging through the streets of Paris shouting 'Charrette! Charrette!' The atmosphere was one of excitement and anticipation.

French architects say, 'Je suis charrette' ('I am charette') or 'Je fais une charrette' ('I'm doing a charette'), meaning 'I'm running up to a deadline and working flat out on a project'. This is the atmosphere that the modern-day design charette tries to create.

It is a forum where the client, community and designers all work together under one roof by means of an intensive design workshop.

Sharon Court, the Somerstown Stories project leader, had become aware that one of the postgraduate units of study involved creating a 'Somerstown Masterplan'. Recognizing an opportunity for collaborative work, Martin Andrews and David Goodman, from the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries, worked with Sharon to devise a specific charette enabling architecture students and students from Charter Academy to work together exploring issues that affected the local area. The workshop created an opportunity for the students to hear directly from local residents about the challenges they perceived in the area, while also providing the pupils access to a more objective, strategic perspective on where they lived.

The Somerstown Stories charette took place over one day, and reflected the sense of 'working flat out on a project'. The structure broadly followed a 'Design Thinking' (Brown, 2009; Martin, 2009) process. Two groups were formed from a mix of students, pupils and other stakeholders, and they were given an open problem statement as a starting point:

How might you create a 'thing' that reconnects a community split by Winston Churchill Avenue?

The two groups proceeded to work through a series of exercises under the headings 'Explore', 'Generate' and 'Create'. 'Explore' required the groups to analyse and challenge the problem, and re-form the statement in their own way. 'Generate' provided a series of exercises where participants diverged away from the problem to produce a range of possible solutions or ideas. Finally, 'Create' asked the groups to converge their thinking towards one 'design ambition', which culminated with a presentation from each group to a selected audience, with representatives from the University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Anglican Diocese and local community organizations.

Since the Somerstown Stories charette took place, Martin, Sharon and David have continued to meet together periodically to share news and incubate ideas for new projects. Sharon continues to be interested in university–community partnerships, and has attended conferences such as GUNI, CUExpo and Engage as a community partner. For Martin and David, their pathways have diverged: Martin has continued to deliver and develop charettes from an architectural and design perspective, but David's work has become more focused on organizational creativity and innovation. Therefore, it seemed to the three of them that it was time to take a retrospective view on the experience, drawing from three stakeholder viewpoints.

The people interviewed for this commentary are Canon Nick Ralph (NR) from the Diocese of Portsmouth; Sharon Court (SC), Creative Practitioner and Project Manager for the Somerstown Stories project; Martin Andrews (MA), Architect and Principal Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture; and Andrew Joyce (AJ), a University of Portsmouth student at the time of the design charette, and now a registered architect working at ArchitecturePLB in Winchester.

Q1: Can you briefly describe what a design charette is?

SC: As I understand it, a charette is a creative workshop, which enables participants to explore a theme using fun, engaging activities. On the surface, I suppose it might look quite lightweight, but what I loved about it was the underlying thinking, which is both strategic and nuanced.

The architecture charette we experienced challenged people to come up with design solutions that responded to the particular needs and context of Somerstown.

It included architectural concepts and ways of thinking, but the terminology didn't create barriers to participants, as the emphasis was on the activity rather than the vocabulary.

NR: An event that brings together designers, in this case student architects, with a specific design objective, working in teams, and in collaboration with a community partner, with lay representatives giving information and feedback.

MA: Since I joined the University of Portsmouth School of Architecture in November 2008, I have been able to actively test a model of teaching called the 'design charette'. Traditionally, students have learnt about architecture through hypothetical projects set by academic staff (Lackney, 1999). Typically students become the client, the designer and the consultant team, mimicking a situation that rarely occurs within the profession. After carrying out research in experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), my ambition was to alter this teaching dynamic by providing our students with access to clients and stakeholders via design charette events. Our students who take part in charettes are able consider everything afresh; how they communicate (both graphically and verbally) and what their role is within the larger consultant 'team'. Charettes provide our students with opportunities to reflect on how they learn about architecture and how this directly relates to the profession. These methods of working with our students correspond very well with ideas the HEA are considering with regard to engagement through partnerships (Healey *et al.*, 2014).

AJ: A design charette is a collaborative planning session in which groups of people work together to explore solutions to design problems. Charettes are useful as they allow you to explore multiple solutions at a time to identify what works and what does not. They also allow you to define the constraints placed on a site, as well as stakeholders to engage with as the design develops.

Q2: What was your role in the Somerstown Stories design charette? Have you taken part in design charettes before?

SC: I was the Project Manager for the whole of the Somerstown Stories project. This charette was just one aspect of many different, discrete events across the life of the project. I had never taken part in a charette before, but I found it fun, interesting and an engaging way to address some 'big questions' about the nature of the challenges facing the Somerstown area.

NR: I have taken part in many of these. My role was to set up the church as an effective and useful partner, and help the church community partners to make a useful contribution that made sense to the students and professionals. In essence, it is one of interpretation.

MA: I was the lead academic for the Somerstown Stories design charette. During the past ten years, I have been responsible for developing a contained one-day design charette model, alongside a portfolio of longer events. These models have a particular focus on three key areas of student learning essential when working in architectural practice and the design studio: verbal communication, hand-drawn representation and model-making (Brookfield, 1995). This method of teaching also reinforces the core values put forward in the 'University Strategy', with the enhancement of professionalism and the provision of career-enhancing opportunities for the 'Portsmouth Graduate' (University of Portsmouth, n.d.).

AJ: From my memory, I was a participant in the charette, working in a small group to analyse the design problem and develop possible solutions. In particular, I worked on the issues associated with the effect that Winston Churchill Avenue was having on the community and the future regeneration of the site. The avenue slices through the Somerstown area like a knife, dividing it into two halves. At the time, there was little connectivity between the two halves, due to the issues associated with crossing the avenue.

Q3: How did your involvement in this project compare to other participation events that you have taken part in?

SC: To begin with, it was a lot of fun! This is actually a very powerful aspect, because it means participants are more likely to engage and contribute more to a process if they think it's fun and easy. One of the things I particularly liked is the way that the enquiry question was shaped – not by the workshop leaders, but by the participants themselves. This enabled a stronger sense of ownership, and it gave the students and residents a clearer, more authentic voice.

The style of the charette meant that everyone's contribution was valued and there was a space for everyone to contribute, regardless of their background or level of education. In an area such as Somerstown, with low literacy levels and poor outcomes on the IMD scale (Index of Multiple Deprivation), it is especially important that any consultation model is as accessible as possible. The charette was therefore an excellent model to use.

NR: This was smaller than some other events, but was in an area of significant disadvantage. It also had the greatest potential and opportunity. The locals were aware of that, and more open to radical design ideas as a result.

MA: Because the Somerstown Stories design charette was held outside of the confines of the School of Architecture, our students needed to think very carefully about the group of people that they were presenting to. This event provided our students with opportunities to think about what they need to say, and how to say it, in order to explain their design ideas clearly and concisely to a non-architectural audience. This way of thinking is embedded in project-oriented and project-based learning methods (Boss and Krauss, 2014). In this charette, we were pleased to see the student groups finish their design work prior to the deadline in order to script and rehearse their presentations; they were keen to be seen as professional in front of their 'clients'. This is a trend that we are now noticing in the majority of charettes that we run at Portsmouth; a key skill as they progress on to become fully qualified professionals.

AJ: The main difference was having members of the public participating in the design process, offering us a different perspective on the problems associated with the regeneration. This allowed us to understand the particular issues individuals had with the existing condition, instead of interpreting this from research and analysis of the site. I think this type of engagement also helps to break down the barriers between the participants, as well as improve the perception of architects being intellectuals, who are imposing a solution on a community, without compromise. This was particularly important in Somerstown, as the majority of the problems associated with the area can be attributed to the modernist vision of the 1960s and 1970s.

Q4: What are the advantages of a design charette over other types of public consultation events?

SC: As the charette progressed, the structure of the session meant that we didn't immediately aim at the most obvious question, but we had time to play with words and meanings, which enabled us to identify some of the deeper issues affecting the locality. This process prompted some great discussions and questions, which in turn helped draw out some of the deeper, more foundational aspects. I strongly suspect this wouldn't have happened if we'd just settled on a more obvious starter question.

Also, I particularly liked the way that everyone's contribution was valued, which to me is very important. The model-making and playful aspect helped to create an informal and inviting atmosphere, but the work itself was no less valuable or insightful as a result – if anything, it enabled us to include younger and less-experienced residents, whose insights might not have been included otherwise.

NR: They come up with a variety of design ideas more quickly, but the development is done on site and in the sight of the community partners. It therefore has a more authentic feel for them. In some cases, they can see it developing throughout the day and have a greater sense themselves of participation and ownership. They have formed positive relationships with the students, and begun to trust them. They get to understand at a deeper level why they have come up with the designs they have. It connects them more closely. That may not last, but it works for the day itself.

MA: From a learning and teaching perspective, I have seen how design charettes excite our students and instil a confidence arguably resulting from working in small group scenarios (Jaques, 1991). My personal experience is that this level of engagement is often missing from projects taught traditionally in a university design studio setting. Students have the ability to make public consultation events fun and thought-provoking. Our students have an excellent level of knowledge about their chosen subject and profession, but because they are not yet fully qualified, they are viewed differently from architects; they are seen to be much more accessible by their audience. This helps by breaking down any barriers that may exist within the small groups that are formed during the charettes; their fellow teammates can come from a variety of backgrounds, and our students are very good at introducing the principles of architecture and design to a lay audience.

AJ: The advantages are that charettes offer a collaborative and engaging environment for the members of the public to contribute to the development of the proposals. Typically, with other types of public consultation events, the design proposals are significantly developed before they are presented. This can create animosity among the consultees, as they feel they are having a solution imparted to them and not being involved in the process. This helps to defuse tensions and adversarial relationships between the different parties, and allows comments to be fed into the proposals at a very early stage.

Q5: What didn't you like about this design charette? What could be improved for future events? What didn't work in this particular scenario?

SC: My only disappointment is that more people weren't able to attend on the day. I think the charette would have been even more successful with greater numbers, which again is a testimony to its flexible and engaging style. Usually greater numbers result in fewer voices being heard, but I would say that a charette neutralizes this effect.

NR: We could have done with more community participants and a warmer church, but the work was great.

MA: Our ambition when organizing design charettes is to work with as many people as possible. Our ideal charette scenario is to have a good mix of local residents, school children, teachers, professionals, young adults, university students and local authority officers and employees. Sadly, although the invites were distributed widely throughout the community, the range of people who took part in the Somerstown Stories design charette was quite narrow. The outputs that were produced were very good, but I believe they would have been even better if our teams had been more diverse.

AJ: The public attendance could have been better, as could the diversity of the participants. As the charette was being held in the church, the majority of the participants were associated with the congregation. I feel this limited the input from other members of the community, and perhaps inadvertently formed a barrier for their participation. This could have been avoided by holding the event in a community centre or school, where perhaps more members of the public might have attended.

Conclusions

Here the interviewees were invited to add some closing thoughts.

SC: I think a charette is a fantastic model for public engagement because it works on so many levels: it values the contributions of everyone who takes part, regardless of whether they're from the university, a professional practice or the neighbouring block of flats. It is accessible and creates space for authentic voices to be heard. It benefits not only the residents but also the students in their learning and professional development. Furthermore, it offers challenge and development to teaching staff and practitioners, enabling them to work with real clients in a live setting. There is always the danger that teaching and research creates a distance between theory and practice; live projects and charettes as a model of engagement significantly reduce that gap and challenge lecturers and researchers to actively listen and engage authentically with the people in front of them.

NR: This was a hugely worthwhile project that enabled students to learn to work with lay community members, and help them develop their communication skills verbally as well as in design, with people who were passionate about their church and community. This was unfiltered. The community partners had the attention of the university, student architects and professional architects/lecturers in a way they would never normally experience, but appreciated having. The local community received multiple ideas and designs that would never normally be possible in an entertaining, but also extremely quick way. It was extremely effective.

MA: Following the conclusion of our charette events, we collect and collate feedback from our participating students to see if we can make improvements. At the end of the Somerstown Stories charette, we received the following comments from a participant: 'This fast-paced teamwork enabled me to envision the prospect of working in a large studio environment in the future. The skills and strengths exhibited by each team member left me in awe and encouraged in me an ethical respect and admiration of teamwork, of which I hope to again find in my own future career.' Comments like these help me to remain a passionate proponent of design charettes in the learning and teaching environment.

AJ: I feel charettes are a very useful form of consultation to help inspire and engage the public in regeneration and design work. I think it is important to target all areas of the community, in particular the different age ranges and social classes. This needs to be considered in the way the event is arranged and types of activities undertaken. In the case of the Somerstown Stories charette, I feel the charette was invaluable in understanding the context and constraints of the area. I also feel it was a very good way of humanizing the work we were undertaking. This allowed us to develop proposals based on individuals and not just theories.

Closing thoughts

The stakeholder comments have triggered some key questions that require further reflection. First, the importance of the diversity of the participants. This theme is picked up on in several places above, and as David reflects on his most recent charette delivered for a private sector organization (the Southern Co-operative – TSC), it seems to him that the limited success from that event was in part due to a lack of diversity among the participants. Somerstown Stories benefited from a demographic, educational and cultural diversity, providing a wide range of perspectives. The TSC event drew participants from one part of the business, and this part seemed to have a clear and somewhat immovable organizational culture, which created a resisting force to the process. While there would be organizational challenges, the importance of developing these events with a diverse participant base is critical; without this, arguably the charette will be hampered before it even starts.

Second, while the benefits of speed and focus are clear, what is less evident is how these events can maintain and support the continuation of the ideas generated. In the past ten years, the Diocese of Portsmouth has worked with the University of Portsmouth on numerous charettes to redesign or repurpose existing church sites and buildings. Only recently has a project developed past the sketch design, or ‘big ideas’, stage. The project in question, a community engagement and interior redesign scheme for St Michael’s and All Angels Church in Paulsgrove, Portsmouth, started as a student design charette in 2015, slowly progressed through the student-led design development stages, and was moulded into a Heritage Lottery Bid in 2017, with funding of £460,000 being approved in February 2018. The main reason that this project has succeeded where others have not is because the individuals involved have not retired, changed job roles or found employment elsewhere. Project continuity has been retained because the key participants have supported the scheme through all of its phases. These projects take time to grow, and they need to be nurtured despite the speedy, enthusiastic and enriching start that a design charette event can offer; it is always important to consider the ‘long game’ in these types of projects.

So as we continue to reflect on the charette process, further work and evaluation needs to be done on the subsequent parts of the long game. Questions need to be asked that explore collaboration activity to support and sustain the initial stakeholders as they attempt to build from the catalyst of a charette towards the realization of their ambitions.

Design charettes, and more specifically ‘live’ projects, provide students, academics and participants from outside the higher education environment with opportunities to work together collaboratively, bridging the academy and the community. In these types of projects, students are able to make meaningful contributions in safe working environments while preparing for employment in practice, academics are able to observe and review these non-hypothetical projects from a teaching and learning

perspective, and the external partners are able to gain access to a substantial number of creative and inspirational ideas in a relatively short period of time. These projects can benefit all parties in exciting and invigorating ways.

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Notes on the contributors

Sharon Court is a freelance creative practitioner and project manager. For the last two and half years she has been working with Portsmouth Cathedral as curator of their Annual Theme programme, which utilizes a range of events, workshops and lectures to engage the public with a particular topic. As well as being a practising artist, Sharon is also a qualified teacher and youth worker, and brings her creativity and education skills into all aspects of public engagement work.

Martin Andrews is a senior lecturer in the School of Architecture at the University of Portsmouth. He has always had a passion for doing things differently, whether in connection with education, teaching, architectural practice or sport. In his work as the Project Office Coordinator and as a senior lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, he feels he is in a fortunate and sometimes unusual position of being able to combine the worlds of academia and practice.

David Goodman has held the post of Senior Lecturer in Leadership and Management at the University of Chichester Business School since January 2015. Prior to this he was at the University of Portsmouth, initially within the Faculty of Environment and then the Faculty of Creative and Cultural Industries as Business Development Manager. David is particularly interested in the leadership and management of groups, the role of creativity within organizations, and the innovation process within business.

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