The purpose of the guide

This guide is aimed at design studio tutors who intend to run a live project for their students as an alternative to a studio based project in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design courses (although it will have relevance to other built environment disciplines). It will introduce the opportunities and potential problems associated with live projects, and provide a critical introduction to the educational context for such work, based on a study exploring the learning outcomes and issues related to the implementation of such projects (Sara, 2004).

A checklist of approaches for good practice is provided, in order to offer design tutors structured guidance for the implementation of such projects. The guide suggests ways in which live projects might be used to fulfil elements of the current joint RIBA/ARB criteria for validation and prescription.

Live Projects: Defining the Territory

Live projects are one example of innovative educational practice that are being explored in a number of settings in built environment education and have been commonly taken up as an alternative approach to the design studio by the design disciplines. A snapshot study in 1999 suggested that at least half of the schools of architecture in the UK run live or partially live projects (Sara, 2004 p198) moreover discussions at recent conferences suggest that this is expanding. A brief literature review suggests that it is an approach that is also being taken up in the non-design disciplines (see for example the CoBaLT (2001) project for sociology), who will find relevance in all of the non-discipline specific aspects of this guide.

The live project is defined here as a type of design project that is distinct from a typical studio project in its engagement of real clients or users, in real-time settings. Students are taken out of the studio setting, and repositioned in the ‘real-world’. This external involvement tends to result in students producing something that is of value to the client/user group, which might range from ideas, feasibility reports, or research, to a completed design scheme, a construction or other intervention. The project is typically worked out in collaboration with the external collaborators, rather than being imposed by the design studio tutor (in fact the tutor is often very much a part of the team). As a result, the process is more dialogic and inclusive than traditional studio projects, allowing and embracing alternative voices in the studio environment. Perhaps because of this, live projects have been used to specifically attract and encourage a higher proportion of women to take up skills training and higher education in Built Environment courses (Fortune and Turrell, 2003). Students learn to manage their time and the project in a real-world setting, which also introduces a contingent element to the work, whereby unexpected and unpredictable occurrences influence and affect the work as it progresses (Sara, 2004).
Examples
Live projects that have been documented include the following ‘types’ (of course many projects overlap more than one type e.g. interdisciplinary design and build projects):

- Community based projects in which students work with community groups to develop ideas, produce feasibility studies, put together funding applications, design and even build.
  **Key focus:** collaboration, communication, working with clients/users, social sustainability

- Developing design ideas and solutions for a real site and real clients who may wish to build in the future.
  **Key focus:** brief development, communication, working with clients, creativity in the context of reality

- ‘Design and build’ projects, where students are involved in a small project (examples include a children’s playground, an entrance foyer, communication booths) that enables them to see a project through from preparing a brief to design and then construction.
  **Key focus:** relationship between drawing and making, brief development, hands on material understanding, project management, communication, working with client/users

- Interdisciplinary projects that involve students/practitioners from more than one discipline working on a project together, in a ‘real’ context.
  **Key focus:** interdisciplinary learning, collaboration, communication, working with others

Learning Outcomes
The live project has the potential to provide a huge variety of outcomes, both in terms of student learning, and in terms of better integrating the studio with the wider community. Whilst traditional design studio projects are organised around ‘manageable’ projects, the live projects’ introduction of the ‘other’ – the outside influence – means that projects are inherently unpredictable, complex and open to contingency. This means that the learning might be difficult to predict. A survey of staff and students experiences of a variety of live projects (Sara, 2004), suggest that the following outcomes are common:

**Student learning**
- Students show extremely high levels of **enthusiasm**, which are generally higher than in other projects. This enthusiasm is more likely to facilitate deep learning.
- Students are highly motivated and **energetic** in these projects.
- Students learnt to deal with uncertainty and **contingency**.
- Students developed **team-working** skills, but the projects highlighted the need to further develop these.
- Students developed their **communication** skills, particularly in listening and two-way communication, but also in presenting, with a broad range of people and groups.
- Students developed an understanding of the **role of clients and users**, and more so than in other projects.
**Process changes**

- There was a diminished focus on the ‘crit’.
- The projects led to increased levels of student **responsibility**.
- The approaches were people-focused and more **inclusive**.
- The focus was on **process** as much as product.
- The work was undertaken **collaboratively** rather than competitively.
- The projects diminished the level of tutor control and shifted the attention to the role of the client.
- The projects facilitated a shift to **dialogue-based** communication in brief-building and designing within that dialogue.
- The work integrated students into the **community**, thus introducing moral and ethical issues into the work.

The survey supported the value in implementing live projects, not only in the broad range of learning outcomes, but also in the enthusiasm for the projects, where almost all the students surveyed would relish the opportunity to do the same kind of project again. The work was perceived to have increased relevance and meaning, with the perception of the work as ‘real’, as well as the contrast to the rest of the studio, being fundamental to the success of the projects. Active and hands on approaches were seen as positive, and the real constraints were seen as the inspiration for creativity. The work often empowered students to a critical perspective in relation to the architecture profession.

**Addressing the joint RIBA/ARB Criteria (ARB 2003)**

As the long list of learning outcomes make clear, live projects are well placed to address many of the criteria laid out by the accreditation bodies. The following examples highlight criteria that might be addressed by live projects:

**PART 1**

**Design:** ‘Students will demonstrate coherent architectural designs that integrate a knowledge of [the way that] preparation and development of a brief inform a design proposal...work as part of a team’.

**Communication:** ‘Listen, and critically respond to, the views of others’.

**Management Practice and Law:** ‘Students will demonstrate within an academic portfolio... a knowledge of: how buildings are designed and built in the context of architectural and professional practice and the framework of the construction industry within which it operates... And ability to: manage and appraise their own working practices, whether working independently or collaboratively’.

**PART 2**

**Design:** ‘Students will produce and demonstrate coherent and well resolved architectural designs that integrate knowledge of: the social, political, economic and professional context that guides building construction... Briefs and how to critically appraise them to ensure that the design response is appropriate to site and context, and for reasons such as sustainability and budget... An appropriate philosophical approach which reveals an understanding of theory in a cultural context...And ability to: work as part of a team.’

**Technology and the Environment:** ‘The impact on design of legislation, codes of practice and health and safety...during the construction... of a project.’

**Cultural Context:** ‘[To understand] the interrelationship between people, buildings and the environment and an understanding of the need to relate buildings and the spaces between them to human needs and scale.’

**Communication:** ‘[To understand] the contribution of other professionals in the design process showing an appropriate use of team working skills... to represent the testing, analysis and critical appraisal of complex design proposals and their resolution to a range of professionals and lay audiences’.

**Management Practice and Law:** ‘How architects organise, administer and manage an architectural project’.
In addition the validation process is intended to embrace experimentation and innovation in architectural education practice, as Alan Jones (former RIBA vice-president for education) emphasises: ‘Through its role in the validation process the RIBA seeks to maintain and enhance the quality of architectural education and to encourage experiment, innovation and contemporary relevance in course delivery and teaching methods.’ (RIBA, 2003)

**Good Practice Framework**

This report draws on the findings of a triangulated study utilising surveys, case studies, literature review and an autobiographical account, which recorded the responses of both students involved and their tutors (Sara, 2004). This work is drawn upon to provide a guide for the successful implementation of live project work in architectural education. The proposals are presented under the following four stages:

- **Setting up the Project – including involving others**
- **Introducing the Project**
- **In the Process of the Project – including exploring the social implications, developing and reflecting on the learning process and the role of the tutor**
- **At the Close of the Project**

Finally, the barriers to implementation are summarised and suggestions made as to how they might be overcome.

**Setting up the project**

- **Finding/Choosing the project**: Personal involvement of students and staff can be drawn upon to find appropriate projects. Set projects in authentic, real-world environments, making the project as ‘real’ as possible. Aim to be involved in projects that will motivate students and reject the conventional divisions between education and practice, theory and practical. Positively embrace projects that are explicitly political and value-laden.

- **Designing/setting up the project**: Design in a flexibility in the timescales of the project (perhaps consider alternatives to the ‘finite’ timescales of traditional projects and/or design in overrun time and/or additional work for ‘slow’ stages. Carry out a thorough risk assessment and make early contact with the community and police if necessary. Locate the project in the studio as a supplement to more studio-based projects. Plan out the logistics (as far as possible) well in advance.

- **Involving Others**: Include external collaborators in live projects to help break down barriers between community and institution, by both taking students out into the community and bringing members of the community into the university. Make the project accessible to a wide range of people. Liaise with the client/community to develop the brief (which can be further evolved by students and client/community in the course of the project). Ensure that the collaborators represent a diversity of social and cultural groups, including varieties of class, race, sexuality, gender and abilities. Make clear to outside collaborators that this is an educational experience; that students are not providing a professional service ‘on the cheap’ but that it is a process that can still be beneficial to both parties. Find possibilities for interdisciplinary work.

**Introducing the project to students**

- Emphasise the reality of the project and hand over responsibility for the project to students, making it clear that students will need to build on their prior knowledge in order to tackle the project.

- Make any predetermined assessment criteria clear and explicit.

- Highlight to students that human interactions provide natural learning situations and emphasise the need for empathy when working with collaborators.

- Set up a way of thoroughly documenting the project.
In the process of the project

- **Explore the social implications of the project:** Enable equal and collaborative relationships between tutors and students, among students and with clients/users/community, but also discuss and expose as problematic the power relations inherent in the setting. Make apparent and reflect upon the need for social negotiation and mediation, how the project will affect the society and thus the inherent responsibilities and moral choices of such action. Encourage multiple perspectives and representations of the content of the project by giving voice and value to all participants and encouraging a diversity of responses.

- **Develop and reflect on the learning process:** Provide time for critical reflection in specific discussion sessions and more informally to assess the processes used and in particular to help students to become aware of their own learning. Develop a review and assessment process appropriate to the project (this could be developed in conjunction with students), challenging whether the project needs to be marked at all. Acknowledge and emphasise the role of the student in evolving the content of the project and what skills they will develop, to ensure they are relevant to each individual (even when the work is undertaken as a group), through self- or group-directed processes that are self-regulatory, self-mediated, and self-aware. Require both expert professionals and students to make explicit the decisions they are making. Encourage reflection upon ‘live’ experience before rushing into designing responses. In this way new experiences can act as a stimulus to learning, but new meanings may also be sought in old experiences.

- **Promote and nurture a supportive learning environment:** Facilitate an equal, democratic and collaborative atmosphere to balance the traditional individualistic competitive environment. Acknowledge that learning is a holistic process: discuss and give worth to students’ values and feelings.

- **Recast the role of the tutor:** Develop the position of expert advisor and facilitator to the project, offering support, advice and enabling, rather than instructing. Provide/enable formative assessment throughout the different stages of the project (in order that later stages may be informed by earlier experiences). Provide access to departmental support where needed. Reflect on the way the project is progressing and be open to develop or change projects as a result of that reflection. Be alert to find transformative pedagogic ‘moments’ (make a point of searching out the un-named as a part of the observation and reflection process to acknowledge the socially and culturally constructed nature of learning). Be reflexive and aware in order to highlight, question and facilitate solutions to problems with the work in process. Consider suspending assessment for the project or assessing the project entirely on the quality of the students’ final communication of the work to the clients.

- **Facilitate Group-work:** Consider providing workshops around how to manage working in groups, or structure support to facilitate successful group-work (perhaps through group-focussed assessment of processes). Expose relations of domination within the group-work. Determine a group-working protocol. Hand over to students as much responsibility for the projects as possible and trust students to rise to that responsibility. Work with students as a part of the team wherever possible.

At the close of the project

- **Provide time for students to discuss how their own values may concord with or differ from those of the profession, the studio, the school of architecture and society – potentially leading to better future practice.**

- **Encourage a discussion (and potentially action) of how these differences of values may be challenged and/or exposed.**

- **Include all participants in any evaluation or assessments – this could help to give value to the participants, as well as diminishing the power of the tutor over the student.**

- **Hold a debriefing session with the students in order to find out and make them aware of what they learnt from the project, and how this might differ to a more traditional studio based project.**
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About The Author

Dr Rachel Sara is a senior lecturer at the University of Plymouth, School of Architecture and Design. She has been researching architectural education for the past five years. Initial involvement in the CUDE (Clients and Users in Design Education) project, led to the co-authoring of ‘The Crit: An Architecture Student’s Handbook’ (Doidge, Parnell & Sara, 2000). She has since written more broadly on architectural education and was awarded a prize in the EAAE (European Association of Architectural Educators) competition, ‘Writings in Architectural Education’ for work which explores rebalancing the culture of the architecture studio (Sara, 2002). Her doctorate researched the role of the live project in architectural education and this guide draws from this research. She is currently a teaching fellow of the University of Plymouth, allowing her to research the variety of approaches to studio teaching across the design disciplines.