

Critical analysis of the student, tutor and client perspectives in Live Project practices

A look at the Sheffield Live Project model

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is concerned with the methods and practices in architectural education and specifically with the Live Projects module at the Sheffield School of Architecture. The module asks students to work on solutions with clients, delivering architectural services while a tutor assumes a background consultant role. The paper studies the tutor-student relationship throughout the live project and its reconfiguration when the additional role of the external collaborator is considered. The tri-polar distribution of influence over the outcome of the project is the central theme through which the outputs of the project are examined.

The paper examines the ability of the module to address skill gaps both inside and outside academia via community projects varying from design and build to master planning and policy proposals. Through reviews of past projects, conclusions are drawn on successful tactics employed within the delivery of live projects. The study draws upon interviews with participants on all sides of the project as well as reviews of outputs. The inherent tension between the competing agendas of students, clients and mentors is discussed and examples of the benefits and drawbacks of the Live Projects are presented.

The paper attempts to define characteristics of what constitutes a successfully negotiated project and the critical challenges in delivering the module. It argues for the future of this specific way of teaching architecture underpinned by ethical choice of assignments.

Keywords: Live Projects, Architectural education, Experiential learning, Collaborative learning, Reflective practice

INTRODUCTION

In recent years architectural education in the UK has suffered criticism. 'The Future for Architects?' report (Robinson et al, 2011) highlights the need for further integration between education and practice, whilst the RIBA Appointment Skill Survey 2014 paints a rather bleak picture of graduates as ill-prepared to take on roles in practice. Better integration of practical experience is one of the top

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concerns in the RIBA Educational Review 2014. On the other hand, alternative ways of practicing architecture are becoming widely recognised, recently highlighted by Studio Assemble nomination for the Turner Prize. Practices, such as muf and 00 Architecture, adopt a similarly alternative philosophy acknowledging that building form is not necessarily the best solution of a given spatial problem. (Awan, N.; Tatjana, S.; Till, J., 2011) In this context, most schools of architecture currently incorporate a Live Project module of a kind, in order to provide that direct interaction between students and an external collaborators. Educational conferences and the launch of a Live Projects network website have framed the theoretical background of the educational process within the UK, however, definitions and practices still vary widely between universities. Using interviews with clients, students and mentors who have taken part in series of Live Projects, this paper looks closely at the practical issues arising from the involvement of an external collaborator and the complexities of working within a set of unpredictable circumstances. The objective of the paper is to highlight the challenges and opportunities which live projects may present to educators in negotiating the tutor-client-students relationships and to present precedents of successful practice. It argues for the wider adoption of a socially conscious model of Live Projects as complementary to the studio-based model of architectural education.

THE SHEFFIELD LIVE PROJECTS MODEL

The Sheffield School of Architecture has been conducting Live Projects in a structured form since 1999 and has gradually built a model for their delivery. It presents a method of learning in which students face actual client based problems, distinctive to the predominantly transmission based model of studio education. (Sara, 2011)

The SSoA Live Project is defined by a relationship with an external client, a strong participatory nature and emphasis on the processes of the project as well as its outcomes. (Butterworth et al, 2013)

The vertical structure of the Sheffield projects incorporates students from both master's years in architecture as well as students from closely related degrees. The module takes place at the immediate beginning of the academic year for a period of six weeks. Assessment of the project is based on final presentations in front of clients and peers, a reflective discussion between the student group and tutor and a management report submitted individually by the students. The module is concerned with the development of practical and soft skills in the context of alternative practice. Brown (2012) qualifies it within the post-modernist model of live projects - one focused on the process rather than the end product. Two project offices have been established in the school to support the work of the students and to develop the work of past projects - Bureau of Design and Research (Chiles & Care, 2008) and most recently - Live Works.

OVERVIEW OF EXAMINED LIVE PROJECTS

This study draws on the experiences of students, clients and mentors from both stand alone projects and project series in Sheffield between 1999 and 2014. Three strands of Live Projects have been looked at more closely. In all cases, an ongoing client engagement within a certain geographical area has developed a strong relationship with the University of Sheffield. These are: *Southey Owlerton Area Regeneration, Sheffield, UK* – A total number of 8 projects in a timeframe of 13 years. This series of projects have been concerned with developing feasibility studies and master plans for the regeneration area; *Ecclesall Sawmill, Sheffield, UK* – A total number of 7 projects in a timeframe of 10 years, concerned with built outputs; *Sharrow, Sheffield UK* – A total number of 7 projects in a timeframe of 10 years. Working in the same locality the projects have varied from master planning to participatory architecture and most recently building design and strategies for adaptation. The continuous relationship provides a constant set of parameters which allows for an easier comparison between different projects within the series. The paper discusses the benefits of a sustained involvement with a specific client organisation.

METHODOLOGY

The research aims to develop an understanding of the challenges faced by the three main negotiators - the student, the mentor and the client throughout the project, and the strategies they develop to overcome them. It aims to analyse the conflicts originating from the transient nature of student involvement within an external framework and to understand how these offer opportunities for learning. The paper adopts a qualitative approach. Primary research has been undertaken between 2012 and 2015. Structured interviews with 17 students have been conducted. Questions have been concerned with (in order of questioning): familiarity and expectations of the module; self-evaluation of acquired skills; whether the student had regarded the live project as a finished product; most significant outcomes; and ideas for improvement of the module. An online survey (questionnaire) have also been conducted, employing a similar order of questioning. In total 8 students sent complete responses. Observations of student engagement and evaluation days have also contributed to the study. Out of the 25 students, 16 have been participants in one of the sustained impact projects discussed in the previous chapter. Graduates of the bachelor's degree of the school have accounted for 13 of the interviewees and newlyenrolled students -12.

Exploratory interviews have been conducted with 4 mentors (tutors) and 8 clients. Semi-structured questioning has been adopted due to the different level of engagement and knowledge of Live Projects. In each case the discussions have focused on the particular projects they have been involved with as well as in depth discussions about the structure of the module. Secondary research has been conducted through documentary research involving project reports, publications and online

FIGURE 1:
Example of Live Projects (left to right):
Title page from Southey Owlerton Neighbourhood Strategies (2002);
Example of built design - 'Gateway to Ecclesall Woods' (2011);
Students testing a compost brick device, 'One Great Workshop' (2014).



student blogs. The collected data has been organised around the roles of the different negotiators, and commonalities about the general structure of a Live Project have been identified.

NEGOTIATING THE PROJECT

The student

Live Projects provide students with series of conflicts, designed to foster an educational process. The structure of the module was inherently opposed to the individualistic and competitive learning occurring within studio culture and favours collaborative approaches. Opinions amongst the students pointed to the importance of group dynamics: *'You are spending time with people Monday to Friday, all day for six consecutive weeks... interacting with students I wouldn't be working usually with.'*

The module selection process presented the student with their first challenge giving them five choices. These preferences were then used to distribute the students around the projects so that different master's courses were equally represented in each one. While this choice gave opportunity for the students to take part in the process it was not uncommon for students to get their third, fourth or fifth choice. Testing the importance of this choice in fostering personal motivation about the future project, students were confronted about receiving a less preferable choice. Generally, attitudes were dismissive: *'I got my fifth choice. The project was actually very interesting and successful.'* Rather than the actual objective of the project, the involvement of a client was given as a reason for heightened levels of motivation. Students noted that: *'the fact that the project is in a real situation with a real client encourages you take decisions more seriously'*.

Belbin (1981) argues that it is the right mixture of skill sets and attitudes that are relevant to a group's actual success to achieve their shared goals, rather than commonalities between members. Understanding group potential and skills in advance of the project was mentioned as

an important factor: *'We would have been able to apply these skills sooner and then provided even more'*. Some students acknowledged the fact that they had used skill tests to allocate roles, whilst others mentioned that responsibilities were delegated in a more immediate manner. There was little evidence to suggest that either of the two ways of allocating roles within the group had been more successful than the other, as project outcomes did not vary significantly. The group mixture of different attitudes, skills and experiences, however, seemed to affect the prospects of the project from the onset. When asked what their prior expectations were, a divide occurred between undergraduate alumni and newly enrolled students. For new students: *'the live projects certainly provided an alternative approach to my previous experience of practice and university'*; *'an incredibly different ethos'*; *'enabled me to explore other ways of working which had been previously unavailable'*. On the other hand, final year students and alumni of the school had already embraced the participatory way of working of the Live Projects and in this sense went in equipped with an already formed mental model of action: *'I was already on board with Sheffield's way of doing things'*. Several students, however, were less specific: *'I just thought it was a rite of passage'*, whilst one student referred to the module as *'a student equalizer' [sic]* - implying that there is a *'correct way'* of working - by the end of the Live Project students would develop a similar attitude towards architecture. Some of those comments echoed the ideas of Schön (Argyris and Schön, 1974, pages 6–7) about the difference between people's actions and behaviour. The students tended to voice their lack of bias at the start of the project – expressing an espoused theory, or their perceived behaviour and attitudes toward the issue or people at hand. However, when faced with a problem they usually favoured a previously established method of practicing utilising what Schön refers to as theories-in-use. The alumni relied on their pre-formed mental model of behaviour developed by their previous knowledge of the module and assumptions about its outcomes. A challenge to the Live Projects selection process, therefore, could be the inadvertent creation of student core within a specific group whose pre-conceptions of the project's outcome and functioning could prevent infiltration of new approaches and ideas by a newcomer.

Since the students did not work in isolation and typically negotiated conflicts inclusively, a type of collaborative learning inevitably took place through interaction. In order to transfer skills and knowledge effectively, however, relevant group sizes were established. Small groups tended to lack diversity of skills and resources, while large groups could introduce organisational and hierarchical complications. When asked what they would change, almost all of the students expressed opinions about reducing group sizes. Smaller groups were quoted as an improvement by which active members could be better distinguished from the passive ones.; *'Fourteen in a group is just too many to manage and coordinate'*; *'Decision making became really watered down'*; *'Too many timetable conflicts ... to create a consistent focus during the opening weeks.'* Some of the clients have also pointed to the: *'unpredictability of their (the students) time and availability'* as an issue. Authors such as Cooper, (Cooper et.al, 1990) and Fletcher (Fletcher et.al., 1992) favour groups of five to six people due to the efficacy of

knowledge transfer. In the Sheffield case this meant doubling of the current number of live projects being run, which seemed unfeasible. Alternating live projects, peer-assessment and distributing greater individual responsibility were put forward as alternative methods in order to stimulate a more equal learning environment.

Sara (2011) poses that learning within a Live Project can be seen as experiential following the model established by Kolb and Fry of observation, reflection, abstraction and testing of ideas. Kolb (1984) argues that once an abstract idea has been formulated the learner needs to test it; otherwise, the learning process is incomplete. This is what the repeated participation in a Live Project in the upper year should provide an opportunity for. However, no student expressed an explicit awareness of the need to test abstracted ideas in their second Live Project. There was an implicit understanding, however, of its importance. One student commented that: *'making more references to the previous years' work might be useful'*. A MAAD student – a non-RIBA accredited course in which live projects take place only once, commented on experiencing a single project: *'I believe it is only half of what I have learned from the live project'[sic]*. Whilst the post-rationalisation management report produced in the lower year provides the opportunity for much needed reflection, the upper year could potentially benefit from theorising or speculating about the live project before it begins.

Internal group conflicts seemed to occupy much of the students' perspective. Till (2006) discusses the idea that there is an implicit knowledge transfer between the fifth and sixth years within the Live Projects (The IYO Live Project, 2006). The current module structure largely prevents the upper year of participating actively within the first two weeks of the process due to course deadlines. Tutors generally pointed to the fact that the earlier start gives opportunity for the lower year to engage further with the project and thus prevent dominance over the group by the more experienced students. Opinions varied: *'When the sixth years came back they took the reigns'*; *'The divide between fifth and sixth years on a project can have a big influence on the success and direction of a process'*; *'the fifth years inevitably implode as they try and create a management structure, generally with no previous experience'*. Suggestions that a better understanding of how important is the management of the group earlier in the project could have helped them to perform better. Communication skills were rapidly developed by students in order to overcome this gap, early on in the process.

The mentor

As the facilitator of the Live Project the mentor yields significant influence over the educational process and its outcome. The main responsibilities of the mentor are the negotiation of the project brief with the client, the overseeing of the students' progress and the examination of the result. Throughout the process the mentor adopts a background role and acts as an expert consultant, rather than an instructor. Chiles and Till (2007) state *'The tutor can adopt the role of a student for the*

first time'. The mentor, however, does not operate in isolation and has a clear research agenda: *'Live Projects are a very good mechanism for investigating different ways of practicing architecture'*. As such, even if there is no direct involvement throughout the process, the choice of project and formulation of a brief is a way the mentor exerts influence.

The type of brief and client have been highlighted as crucial for the successful development of the project. Setting the expectations for the client seemed to be of great importance. One mentor commented: *'We make it very clear to the clients what is the end result but also that it is the students' education and they cannot rely and expect that to be a professional service. We have an agreement signed.'* For students relative freedom in the project seemed to be of importance: *'I felt that some groups were never going to be able to push the brief as the clients had counterproductive motives'; 'Live projects can become too pragmatic- there should be more encouragement and elements of experimentation'*. The mentor, therefore, needs to negotiate the different expectations of clients and students throughout the short timescale of the project and afterwards. Mentors had a vested interest to facilitate the acquisition of skills the students were aiming for, and to look for a satisfactory outcome for the client. However, due to the experiential nature of the Live Project module a failed project could still provide a basis for critical reflection and for substantial learning to occur within the student. As such the mentor was somehow impartial to the highly motivated and outcome driven pair of the student-client. On a failed to materialise project, a mentor commented: *'What the team missed was to engage the resident artist in more of the creative work which could have led to a clear choice of who to take the work further. I really think that this was a missed opportunity'*. Mentors acknowledge that: *'It is a different role to a tutor in a studio'; 'It is about asking them to come up with alternatives, rather than giving them an immediate solution'*. It is important, therefore, for students to be aware of the agenda and position of the mentor in negotiating conflicts within the Live Project. Coming from a studio background, the lack of guidance by the mentor could be misunderstood as successful progress of the project.

The production of a management report provides the opportunity to critically reflect on failures and formalise the knowledge gained, which is the base for the evaluation by the mentor. A participant in a highly marked project commented: *'I think the project was successful, because the city officers and local people gave us good comments'*. However, the same project did not manage to trigger an outcome and it was shelved by the client. This way of assessment was criticised by some students, stating that individual feedback had been lost and individual contributions were hard to evaluate. Some members of the group were left frustrated having achieved the same grade as others who had not contributed as much. Written client feedback had been mentioned by a student as scarce, as well as the lack of diversification in grades. Slavin (1989) argues that for an effective collaborative learning to take place 'group goals' and 'individual accountability' need to be both present. Within the three part assessment - the group presentations, reflective review and management report only the later

presents a degree of individual accountability, which again is distorted by the passage of time and postrationalisation. A mentor addressed this issue: *'One of the main issues is how to deal with peer to peer marking. Sixty percent of the mark comes from the reflective process, but maybe we don't teach them enough on how to reflect to the level of detail and insight that is possible.'* Peer reviews taking place at different stages of the process have been suggested as a way to avoid this issue and paint a clearer picture of the process both for the mentor and student.

The client

The horizontal plane of collaboration within a Live Project gives equal influence over the outcome to students and clients. Although formally only the students are subjected to an educational process, the client inevitably undergoes a similar transformative development. One tutor put it: *'We indicate that one of the main successes is when the client gives feedback about how they were influenced to develop their goals or the way their organisation functions'*. Parnell (2002) states that architectural education should focus more on understanding clients than building precedents if it is to support participatory mode of practice. Live Projects tend to support this through early client engagement. A long term client expressed the opinion that *'the short, sharp burst of activity that is a Live Project requires pre-work to be done by someone. If not it is very hard for students to come up with anything that will actually be enacted.'*; *'There is too much assumption of understanding. Even the term 'client' meant nothing to me'*. A former student, turned client, asserted the idea that: *'Educating the clients how to approach the students is essential'* Earlier understanding of budget constraints and client vision could allow for better judgements in the following weeks. Communication between students and clients has therefore been very important during the negotiation of the process. In this context the mentor's understanding of the client's agenda and the possible challenges that could occur throughout the project seemed crucial to be acknowledged and disseminated within the group.

Live projects, in their provision of semi-professional service, can present opportunities for utilising students as low-paid labour. Here the role of the mentor-client relationship is critical. Client organisations undergo an ethical screening process by the mentor. One student noted: *'It takes strong leadership to make sure that students are not exploited as cheap labour to benefit a commercial entity'*. Taking away opportunities from local architectural practices some argued could be a counter-intuitive consequence of live projects. One tutor, however, expressed a different opinion: *'Practices - particularly small ones will not have the resources to deliver the same quality of work in the same time. A crucial reason is the fact that our clients are non-for profit charities; they can't afford to pay full fees. It is a key element of what we do.'* The live projects should offer a different mode of practice and not aim to replace it. The same tutor continued: *'In one project we worked on with a housing association to produce a feasibility study. Since then, the work from the live project has enabled the organisation to raise enough money and commission a local practice. In this sense the projects are presenting opportunities to create local work.'* This idea was expressed

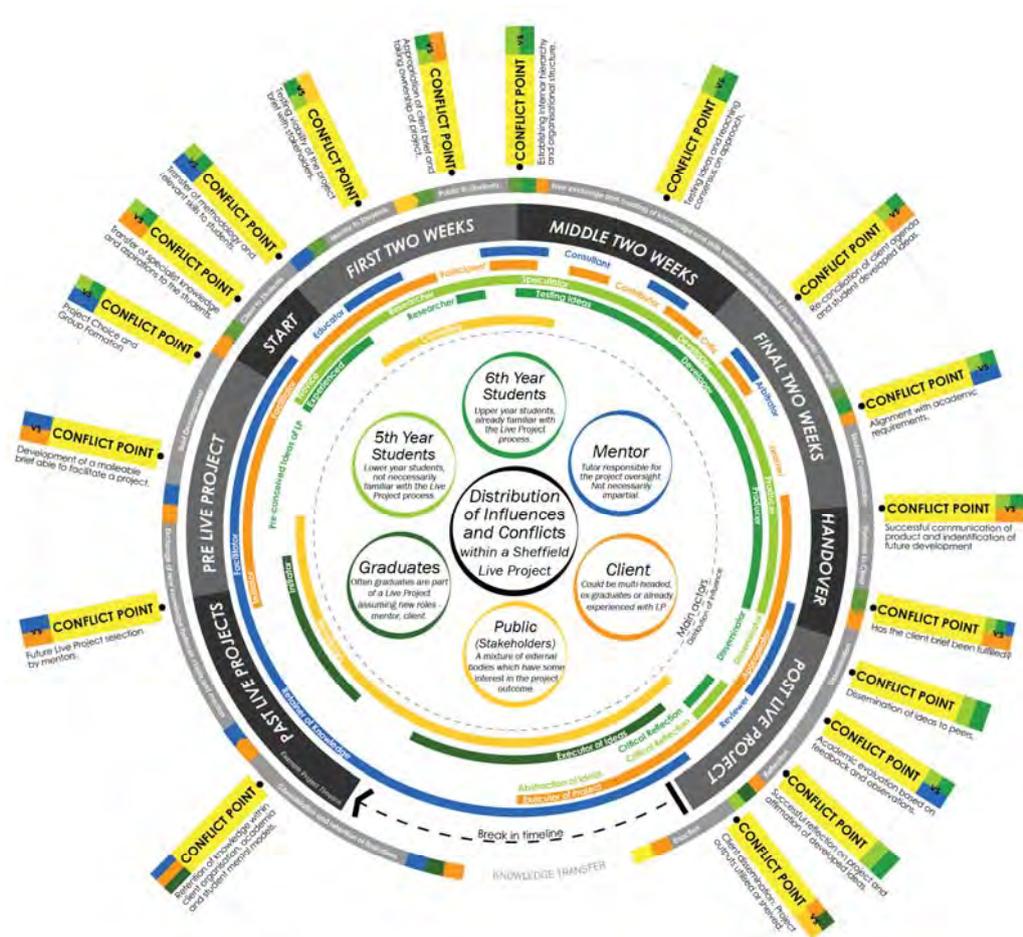
by a former student who had also acted as a client in recent years: *'I would encourage the school to look to young, ambitious graduates to act as clients. Many are trying to pursue imaginative practices and live projects could help initiate a young practice.'* The implications for some of the projects was substantial. One client involved in the Ecclesall projects noted *'The Live Project won an award which helped establish interest in the wider site'*. Within the Ecclesall Sawmill series, the Live Project module could be seen as a transformative process shaping a site in a continuous iterative manner. The educational benefits in such a relationship were tricky to evaluate but generally more experienced clients produced better briefs, were more open-minded and had higher expectations. The existence of a yearly benchmark of the quality of the projects inevitably leads to comparison and desire to surpass the previous year, reflected in both client's aspirations and students' outputs.

From the client's perspective the Live Project was not an academic exercise but an open ended project involving an educational establishment. Emotional involvement by the students and client had potential impact over educational and professional outcomes. Reflecting the ideas of Kolb, (1984) who maintains that learning is a holistic adaptation to the world including feeling, perceiving and behaving; this emotional attachment forms part of the experiential learning process and can influence the abstraction of ideas later on. One student noted that: *'it didn't feel just like an academic project'*, while a mentor observed that *'it felt like the client was on a one person crusade'*. The temporality of the project can also create divisions within the client-student relationship. *'The nature of the module requires the project to be a finished product for the students, but obviously it isn't so for the client'*. Potential issues, therefore, are rushed conclusions and presenting ideas as polished before they have had time to mature. Some clients echoed this sentiment: *'I would like more time to finish the Live Projects, the last few have not really been properly finished/interpreted'*; An understanding amongst long term clients was that the Live Projects are actually about stimulating positive ideas and not coming up with solutions. The desire of a client to reach a tangible outcome of the project created a conflict with the academic exploration of ideas. In successful projects this tension forced both client and student to develop new skills. Continuous involvement with the same client over several years presented more opportunities for those issues to be addressed. However, in some cases clients had fallen out with the module due to the inability to negotiate the conflicting agendas.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Live Project success is here understood as the ability of the tri-polar relationship to negotiate conflict points of influence throughout the project's duration to the benefit of all parties. In order to achieve this aim collaborative processes, transfer of skills and re-alignment of agendas took place. The Live Project outcomes needed to satisfy the evolved goals of the client, the teaching aims of the mentor and the learning requirements of the students. As such, there are certain

FIGURE 2:
Illustration of the
distribution of
influence within a
Live Project.



pedagogical gaps which the module addresses. Knowledge and skills otherwise not widely available within studio or practice based education were offered to students. *‘A fresh reminder that not all architecture has to be desk or office based’; ‘You get less chance to practice these skills in individual studio projects’.* Mentors can exert influence over academic approaches and test research ideas. Clients, on the other hand, are exposed to new methods of approaching problems.

Three sets of predominantly transferrable skills emerged as the main tools for negotiation throughout the Live Project module - namely organisational, communication and practical skills.

Often in practice students are not part of the major decisions on budget, design, programme or roles. The awareness of a client’s business model has therefore dictated the development of project management skills, work ethics, ability to work towards a budget, delivering projects and setting manageable goals. Clients also had been observed to develop similar skills, such as the ability to add value to a brief and to apply unconventional approaches to their practice.

The collaborative nature of the projects ultimately encouraged greater communication within an international student group as well as between

the students and the client. A critical skill developed as a result of the close communication has been the ability to empathise with the client: *'With this project in particular we actually listened to what the community said. The very essence of the project was engagement'*. Many students pointed to the live project as an introduction to community consultation techniques and different ways to approach clients. Soft skills such as liaising, creating networks and different ways in approaching clients were recognised to have been developed by almost all of the students.

A key skill that was acknowledged as essential for the success of a Live Project by clients, students and mentors alike, has been the ability to represent information in an accessible way that allows non-professionals to be able to quickly grasp and understand. Elaborate graphical representations proved difficult to communicate ideas to an audience with little or no architectural background. Hand sketching, production of animations, collage and physical models have all been highlighted as valuable tools. Knowledge about the different uses of a material, construction techniques and hands-on skills have been another part of the expertise students acquire and which some have later taken into their studio projects or professional practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Through sustained involvement in certain areas organisational knowledge, relationships and networks have emerged and reinforced themselves. Both the client organisations and the school have evolved, changed their ethos and adopted different way of practicing or teaching based on empirical evidence. This process has only been able to happen due to the fact that unfruitful projects have been accepted as opportunities for learning and sufficient time frame has been provided for changes to be implemented. Maintaining a large set of parameters constant, the consequent projects have been able to produce better outcomes, build on past ideas and test new ones in relation to them. Actively seeking to establish a relationship with an organisation could prove beneficial to the educational outcomes of the module - producing a better educated client who is able to foster an open brief and to provide better support to students. In turn, the developed framework of operations provides a more comprehensive starting point for brand new projects and inexperienced students, mentors and clients.

For a Live Project to be successful a mentor should facilitate a strong idea framed within a malleable brief by an open to experimentation client, in order to foster collaborative learning within a student group. Individual accountability needs to be maintained within the student group by managing group size and mix. Assessment should encourage peer reviews and promote reflections within longer timeframes. An important factor is the acknowledgment of different agendas of participants and conflict points alongside the project's timeframe. It creates a politically aware student body, which develops alternative skills and tactics in order to deal with the increasingly complicated relationships. At the same time the semi-controlled environment of

academia and ethically sampled projects provide relative safety for the exploration of radical ideas. The rationale of a Live Project intrinsically relies on the process it develops rather than the end product; therefore, the module presents not so much an alternative but a complementary educational practice to the established studio model.

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Project specific information can be found on <http://www.liveprojects.org/> - the official LiveProjects website of the University of Sheffield.