



Debbie Samuel
Colin Treen

STUDENT LED DESIGN PROJECTS I N AN URBAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

INTRODUCTION

National and regional commentators refer to participation by local people as the cornerstone of social regeneration strategies and practices in the designed environment. Community engagement is also seen more widely across Europe as critical to the success of social inclusion and urban renaissance. This can be found in the Guidelines of the European Landscape Convention, the UK government white paper, Strong and Prosperous Communities (2006), and in the CABI Space publication, It's My Space, A guide for community groups (2006).

In design education we also suggest that it is good practice for students to engage with the current debate relating to local distinctiveness and the regeneration of urban communities. To do so they need to become literate in the skills of engaging local communities as an integral part of a design process. At Leeds Metropolitan University (Leeds Met.) students are required to leave the design studios to engage in direct dialogue with local people on live projects where the outcomes are realized and reflected upon. The study and practice of Landscape Architecture within a community context has been part of the academic programme at our institution since the 1970s. The Design and Community (hereafter D&C) projects have ensured that students in their final year of their three year undergraduate degree experience the theory and practice of landscape design in live contexts. The research process has involved compiling an archive of data, post occupancy evaluation of completed site works and sourcing pedagogic evidence to enable a determination of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. Currently the team is exploring the potential for making wider partnerships, supportive of community design agendas.

This paper is in 3 parts,

- Section 1 describes the context and history of the D&C programme with a brief evaluation of the range of projects completed over the past 30 years as part of the undergraduate teaching of landscape architecture at Leeds Met.
- Section 2 picks up on the educational objectives. Using examples from recent student projects we demonstrate how this innovative teaching method offers students a real world learning experience with community.
- Section 3 explores how the learning and teaching outcomes of this approach to Landscape education satisfy the guidelines of the European Landscape Convention to activate local people and value their contributions in their own communities.

CONTEXT

Over three decades more than 100 D&C projects have been undertaken within the largely urban hinterland of the parent university. They may be grouped into four broad categories:

- School grounds: nursery, primary and secondary
- Special needs settings: hospitals, hospices, special needs schools
- Public places: community centres, playgrounds town and village centres.
- Ecological areas: environmental centres, woodland and nature reserves.
- areas: environmental centres, woodland and nature reserves.

The design process enables students to engage in periods of community consultation when they are guided towards understanding client group needs and develop the ability to think creatively to produce site specific proposals that respond to the local culture. We consider that the development of these employability skills are fundamental to student education and prepare a new generation of landscape architects with a practical and knowledge based grasp of regeneration issues and a commitment to producing designs that address both the cultural and physical vernacular.

Concepts of democracy, public participation, empowerment, landscape exclusion and social justice, communities and decision making are discussed by Maggie Roe, a former Leeds Met landscape architecture student, in "The Social Dimensions of Landscape Sustainability", (Benson and Rowe 2000). She writes about how democratic processes are linked to sustainability of landscapes and considers that community participation is of vital importance in creating more sustainable conditions in the landscape. Community participation can generally be defined as 'where people living in an area are able to articulate their desire for change by being involved in the planning and enactment of that change and maintaining and building on that change in the future'. (Rowe and Wales, 1999) A term commonly used in connection with these attributes is empowerment, the belief that local people have or could have the ability to be their own agents for change.

THE HISTORIC RECORD:

In our recent research which set out to evaluate the D&C scheme 30 year's worth of data was collated. The researchers were aware that this was an unusual time period of historic data which when compiled and examined would provide raw evidence for evaluation; an archive of student notebooks, photographic records, copies of plans and drawings dating back to the early 1980s.

The genesis of the programme came in 1974 when tutor Denis Wilkinson led a group of second year students in an ambitious Adventure Playground project. The success of the project led to an enquiry from a Special School for the design and build of an adventure play area in their school grounds. This project involved the children from the school in the design process through the use of sketch models; the design which emerged was built by the students. A subsequent project in 1976 was awarded the National Playing Fields Association prize that year for 'Free Play'. The Design and Community Project was born, supported by the late Patrick Nuttgens (architect and Principal of what was then Leeds Polytechnic). Nuttgens applauded the social and practical aspects of the project and the academic benefits of this programme have since been acclaimed by students, employers, and by external examiners and the Landscape Institute. It is interesting to note that the early D&C Projects predated wider UK developments of Groundwork Trusts and the charity 'Learning through Landscapes'. The social aspects of environmental work have steadily risen up the political and educational agenda since then. As 'Sustainable Communities' and 'Community Involvement' have become the mantra of environmental improvement and regeneration the D&C Projects at Leeds have gained ever more relevance to the landscape profession.

It should be noted however that the programme was not conceived or planned as a 'design and build' programme. At no time was a formal requirement for students to build their project incorporated in the student brief. This tradition was born out of student enthusiasm and the observed benefits of doing so.

The scope of projects has ranged from small courtyard design and build to the master-planning of extensive sites. Projects have typically lasted a minimum of three years, engaging successive cohorts of students, usually working in groups of 5 or 6. Schemes have varied from designing entire special needs gardens with ramps and handrails to nature gardens, playground and outdoor teaching spaces in schools.

Site features have included gazebos, pergolas, raised flower beds, seating, murals, play structures, paths, gateway features and enhanced entrances in woodlands, schools and public places.

Students engage in participative methods of consultation with their community clients and are required to work as a team to develop a site specific design brief and

detailed design options for the site.

Observations from the early years of the D&C project clearly showed the benefits of this approach including some very positive if unanticipated consequences:

- Students were clearly highly motivated and enthused by the idea of seeing their work realised.
- The importance of team working and procedures and especially engendered responsibility towards the team.
- Students learnt very quickly the importance of being precise in specification of materials and their uses.
- Development of communication techniques appropriate to a 'lay' audience.
- Skills such as learning to negotiate with contractors, talking with suppliers, recording and giving feedback on meetings.

POST OCCUPANCY EVALUATION

Research has shown the growth and typology of the schemes; the number of years involved in individual schemes, the phases of a project involvement.

We have used case studies as a method to evaluate the quality of site design. As suggested by Mark Francis in his book, *A Case Study Method for Landscape Architecture* (1999), case study analysis has a long history in landscape architecture and can be utilized to bring out several kinds of information. While some of this information may be unique to the given site, patterns start to emerge enabling the grouping of projects with similar features, be it client types or student interventions. This methodology has enabled us to evaluate and categorise sites we have revisited for research purposes.

Records also show the evolution and shaping of the programme and the transition from initially one off construction projects such as Northways Adventure Playground through to client involvement in the design process, fund raising, collaboration with other organisations for example NACRO and BTCV in projects such as Martin House Children's Hospice and other not for profit community orientated programmes. The research shows clusters of projects which can broadly be broken down into 4 main categories, school playgrounds, special needs and hospitals, environmental and community based. Of over 100 sites 70% are school grounds and special needs projects. Many projects continued for several years and in some cases we have returned to sites to take on further project clusters.

SITE REVISITS

All sites for which a data record survives have been revisited and reviewed

About 40% remain well used or slightly amended, still meeting the needs of the local community group. There are complete losses where areas have been demolished to make way for new buildings and the student work is no longer in existence. Physical deterioration and changes in health and safety legislation over the years has resulted in removal of some play features.

Another 40% of schemes have been rebuilt or updated. Where the original projects may be no more, however a footprint has been left and new developments have followed. In a number of community projects substantial play features dominate where once we had implemented low budget play areas. There are examples of earth mounding and tree planting, initially planted as boundary treatments of playing fields which have matured and become part of the city environment

The case studies presented below have been selected to show the range of types of schemes, and also to provide a longitudinal section through the decades of work.

CASE STUDIES

School Playground at Castleton Primary School 1982-85



Fig. 1: Castleton School (1985)

In the 1980s Leeds students developed school playgrounds as educational resources. Students were encouraged to involve school children in active, creative consultation exercises, often planned around syllabus activities. Students at Castleton Primary School designed outdoor classrooms which included features such as raised ponds for pond life observation and dipping, and a planet themed outdoor play area with a high environmental

educational value. In order to create site designs within limited funds and with the best opportunity for use as an educational resource, students were encouraged to work within the framework of theories of child development.

Special needs Arthur Goldsmith Garden, Disabled Living Centre, St. Mary's Hospital, Armley 1983-1991

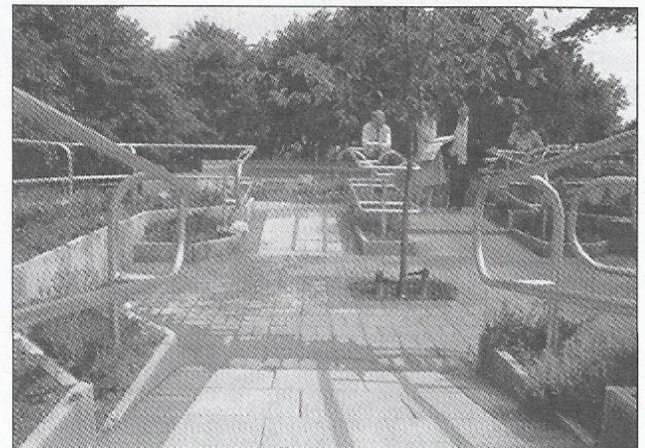


Fig. 2: Arthur Goldsmith Garden (2005)

This long running project involved students in the design and build of a garden for the Disabled Living Centre. The brief for the garden required a test ground for disabled people using walking aids. The resulting garden combines various ramps, steps and surfaces enabling visitors to gain confidence and experience in using walking and gardening aids in an attractive outdoor setting. The student experience involved contact with many disabled people, consideration of their needs and the opportunity to experience wheel chair travel. The garden continues to be used for its original purposes. In addition staff at the hospital, patients and their visitors are attracted to the garden at lunch breaks and visiting times, when it provides a welcome safe, sheltered place for rest and relaxation. Despite funding problems in relation to the maintenance its continued success is testament to how successive generations of users, patients and staff have cherished and adopted the site.

Community Participation with West Park Forum 1998-2000



Fig 3: West Park Fields (2000)

Students became involved at West Park Fields after a local action group had secured the site as a public resource following a failed planning application. The site, 3 miles from Leeds City Centre is adjacent to the University's Beckett Park campus where the D&C Programme has its baseroom. Students wanted to widen public involvement beyond the membership of the action group. Masterplanning and the planning process were addressed by combining a fun day for local residents with a "Planning for Real" event. The students underwent "Planning for Real" training and attended and assisted at a Leeds City council event in an inner city area adjacent to the university prior to hosting their own event. Once trained they were able to set about planning their own event and organised follow up meetings in which all issues raised were prioritised and then recorded in a document which was left with the community group and a masterplan was produced responding to the needs and wishes of local users

Students gained understanding of participatory consultation, gained confidence in speaking at public meetings, obtaining useful work skills which some students went on to champion in their practice as landscape architects.

Environmental project with the Leeds Waterways.

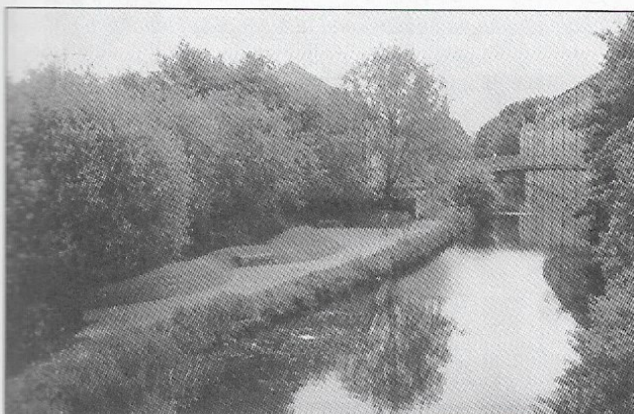


Fig.4: Kirkstall Waterways. (2000)

Students worked on Leeds canal waterfront applying knowledge of sustainable practices and designed and constructed a seating area at the canal edge for the general public. The project relied on the students understanding the environmental issues relating to major water bodies and construction in public places.

THE EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

Among the precepts on which the BA Honours Landscape Architecture course at Leeds Met. was founded were the notions of responsive environments, social and environmental responsibility and the holistic nature of the landscape design process. "The D & C programme is a key component of this strategy and over the years has a strong reputation for design in a social context. It exposes students to the challenge of aiding others within the locality, and promoting the importance of well designed landscapes". (Royffe and Taylor 1987) Landscape Architecture at Leeds Met. continues to emphasise both environmental and social responsibility.

The primary objectives of the D&C programme were initially to develop design, communication, interpersonal, project management and technical skills 'beyond the drawing board' stage of a project. In addition to design drawings each student group have been required to produce and submit note books at the end of each year giving an account of their experience. These show that students have been involved in all aspects of the design process; survey and analysis, consultation, design and build. They have run workshops for children, neighbourhood communities, and have worked with planners; local authority and voluntary agencies and contractors to enable the completion of their schemes. Many projects have involved students in helping to raise sponsorship through collaborative efforts with their client groups. However, in more recent years a greater emphasis has been placed on the theory and skills necessary to involve the 'public and users' in the design and development of their environment.

This programme offers a variety of learning environments and support services that maximise flexibility in teaching approaches. Learning in the real world, with genuine clients sharpens the attitude of the students who understand the necessity to remain focused and in tune with the learning outcomes and competences of the programme.

Students initially receive a series of lectures over a 3month period introducing the theories and practices of working in the community and social engagement. Simultaneously they are introduced to research methods and in a series of workshops, individual and group tutorials students are guided through the engagement and design process with their own clients. This ensures that the educational process remains client and site specific. They are closely monitored in their consultation approaches and in interpreting the needs of their community group by specialist staff at the university. Design is therefore learned through developing critical awareness and sensitivity, understanding principles and testing theories by doing. At the end of the teaching programme the community clients are invited to an exhibition which show case the student work. This is an opportunity to hand over portfolios of student work to the clients and celebrate the student group achievements. In the most recent student exhibition a number of student groups were selected to represent the university in an Enterprise exhibition which demonstrated the work to the entire university and the regional business community. During this period students gain confidence in their communication skills as they discuss their work with a wider audience.

In summary the present learning outcomes are:

- Engage in participative methods of consultation
- Students are required to think creatively
- Improve their verbal communication skills
- Produce drawings and models to be readable to the general public
- Work within constraints of budgets
- Research their projects
- Display entrepreneurial qualities such as team work, organisation and management skills

RECENTLY COMPLETED PROJECTS

As in previous years, 2006 has provided a breadth of projects including four school grounds, a church garden and Hyde Park Source, a local charity that has won a national audience for its innovative community work. Feedback from the client groups and students have generally been positive, all parties expressing a clear note that this type of project is mutually beneficial.

Community partnership at Hyde Park Source.



Fig 5: Work being carried out to renovate a bin yard (2006)

This community garden project set up in 1998 by and for residents to renovate disused bin yard spaces in inner city Leeds. The students are in their second year of working alongside residents, project workers and local volunteers to create a garden space with and for local residents.

With a budget of £1,000 for the construction of the garden, following a period of consultation where residents were given inspirational images to assist them in decision making, the students processed this information into a sensitive site design which utilised many recycled elements. They then worked with the charity as volunteers to implement their design, mentoring younger volunteers throughout the construction phase. Partnerships with organisations such as Hyde Park Source enable our students to participate in a range of activities that meet the learning outcomes of the programme whilst at the same time giving them an in depth insight into the workings of a small community led organisation.

Working with the congregation at St Andrews Church

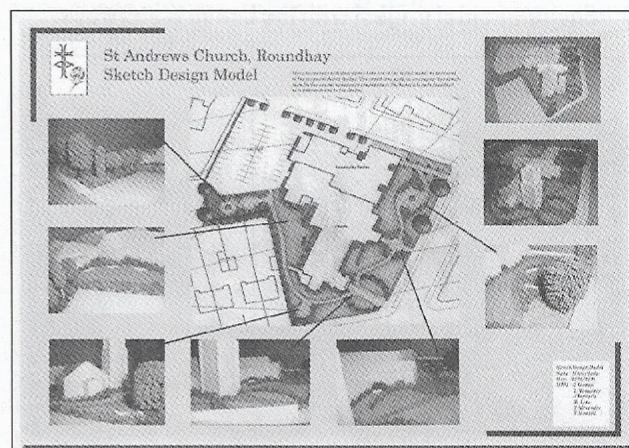


Fig.6: Sketch proposals for St Andrews Church (2006)

The student group worked closely with the minister of the church and a working party of parishioners to agree a design brief. Having constructed models of the site a public meeting was called and detailed designs for the church gardens were discussed. At the end of the project the student group handed over a portfolio of drawings which were used by the church to obtain £35,000 of charitable funding for the implementation of the scheme.

School grounds design and build with BTCV at Alwoodley Primary School

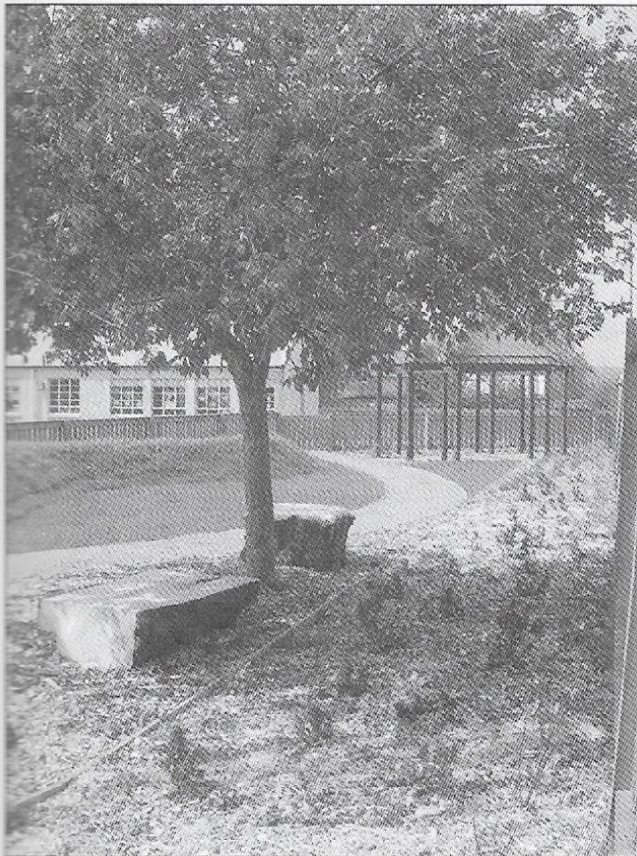


Fig.7: Completed sensory garden at Alwoodley Primary School (2006)

A student group worked in partnership with British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) to master plan a school's sensory garden and teaching area. They embarked upon consultation and design with teaching staff and children at a local primary school for children aged 4 - 11. With funding secured, under the supervision of BTCV, the students became volunteers for this organisation and were able to technically resolve their plans, order and specify materials and spend 2 weeks on site constructing a new sensory garden for the children.

SATISFYING THE GUIDELINES OF THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

Ian Thompson in Ecology, Community and Delight (2000) refers to the social value of landscape architecture

and acknowledges that increasingly landscape architects are people with well developed social consciences interested in improving the quality of life for communities by improving people's surroundings. Many are eager to engage in community programmes, adding community consultation to the palette of skills used by landscape architects. This is echoed in aims 21 to 24 of the European Landscape Convention which state:

- Europe's populations want policies and instruments affecting national territory to take account of their wishes regarding the quality of their surroundings. They have come to realise that the quality and diversity of many landscapes are deteriorating as a result of a wide variety of factors and that this is having an adverse effect on the quality of their everyday lives. Official landscape activities can no longer be allowed to be an exclusive field of study or action monopolised by specialist scientific and technical bodies.
- Landscape must become a mainstream political concern, since it plays an important role in the well-being of Europeans who are no longer prepared to tolerate the alteration of their surroundings by technical and economic developments in which they have had no say. Landscape is the concern of all and lends itself to democratic treatment, particularly at local and regional level.
- If people are given an active role in decision-making on landscape, they are more likely to identify with the areas and towns where they spend their working and leisure time. If they have more influence on their surroundings, they will be able to reinforce local and regional identity and distinctiveness and this will bring rewards in terms of individual, social and cultural fulfilment. This in turn may help to promote the sustainable development of the area concerned, as the quality of landscape has an important bearing on the success of economic and social initiatives, whether public or private.

Whilst the D&C schemes tend to be on a small scale evidence would suggest that each new generation of landscape architects leaves Leeds Met. with a practical and knowledge based grasp of working in local communities, the principle of working with individuals in the community is instilled into the students and a number seek careers in practices where this principle underlines the professional ethos of their employers

It is interesting to reflect that over 1,000 graduating landscape architecture students have taken part in D&C projects as a part of their studies at Leeds Met. This programme has therefore contributed to the development of a significant percentage of currently practicing landscape architects and garden designers in the UK and abroad.



Our records are unable to quantify how many Leeds Met. students end up working in community based practice and local authorities. However we have feedback from former students which would indicate that on the whole they have valued the educational experience, many remarking that they most prized the contact with real clients. The evidence suggests that there is a strong desire to continue to engage student designers with user client groups.

CONCLUSION.

In June 2004 the programme was awarded the UK Landscape Institute's prizes for 'Best Community Involvement Scheme in the past 75 years' and in 2006 received from the UK Higher Education Academy, Centre for Education in the Built Environment an award for excellence in teaching and learning for entrepreneurship in education. (www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk/news/events/beecon2006/programme.phpreference) There is still scope for further development, and challenges to be met.

The final discussion lists key challenges for the future of engaging landscape design students in participatory design processes:

- The challenges to continuing with this approach relate to:
- Risk Assessment: Health and safety requirements to ensure satisfactory learning environment for the students.
- Ethical Principles: Application of university guidelines placing stringent controls upon research with live subjects, both adults and children.
- Identification of Partners: Continuing to secure local organisations with willingness to enter formal partnership agreements.
- Financial and academic support.
- Delivery of such a programme requires a great deal of staff commitment in initially selecting and setting up design projects which will meet recognised learning outcomes. Teaching and learning is supplemented by acting as a project manager to ensure appropriate client and student satisfaction.

Enterprise and entrepreneurial activity can lead to new opportunity to all those concerned. We are currently considering how all parties can benefit, and plan to develop this theme to safeguard the resource base of this teaching model. However, the fundamental recipe of The Leeds Connection remains: "Take learning to some purpose, add learning by doing, plus a dose of Papanek's Design for the Real World, and a land ethic from Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac, stir". (Treen, 2005, p.1)

The D&C programme's future development will continue to move further towards engaging in participative engagement processes. Design and build may only occur if we are able to find new partnerships with organisations such as BTCV with whom we can exchange reciprocal services. They receive detailed site specific design for schools and in return our students engage as volunteers with the organisation and are trained and supervised in the construction of their own designs by the partner organisation.

Extending the programme to accommodate a European dimension with possible partnerships, collaborations or exchanges with other European Landscape Architecture Schools is another possibility. One vehicle for this may be through Le Notre 2, given that one of its main aims is "to enhance quality and to define and develop a European dimension within a given academic discipline or study area."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

All the staff, lecturers and learning officers that have assisted to mould the program over the last 30 years. Particular thanks to Trudi Entwistle, Andy Millard, Chris Morgan, Alan Simson and Alistair Taylor.

REFERENCES:

- Landscape Institute awards.* In: **Landscape**, July 2004, p.33
- Benson, H.F. & Roe, M.H., 2000: Landscape and Sustainability.* London. Francis, M, 1999 A Case Study Method for Landscape Architecture. Washington DC Hare, R. & Samuel, D., 2005: Power to the People. In: *Landscape*, June 2005, pp.21-22
- Royffe, C and Taylor, A: Design and the Community.* In: *Landscape Design*, February 1987
- Treen, C., 2005: What is the Leeds Connection?* In: *Landscape*, December 2005, p.1
- It's my Space: A guide for community groups*, CABA Space, 2006
- Department for Communities and Local, Strong and Prosperous Communities**, The Local Government White paper, October 2006 Built Environment Education Annual Conference (BEECON 2006) conference paper: CABA www.cebe.heacademy.ac.uk/news/events/beecon2006/programme.php