

# Architecture as Social Process. Making Connections

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In July 2017 our first cohort of architecture students received a degree in architecture and took the next steps towards their own architectural practice. In today's globally connected, peer-to-peer, de-centralised society we have aimed to create an environment within the degree that encourages the students to question the changing relationship between the architect and the 'user' and reconsider the practice of architecture within our contemporary professional context. Underlying De Carlo's 1972 call for 'contemporary architects' to make architecture that comes from the 'user', is a focus on the process of 'doing' architecture with those who will go on to live with it and change it over time.<sup>1</sup>

The University itself has a strong history in arts practice and is remote from the urban centres of traditional architectural education. We have drawn heavily on this 'outsider' position – which the location encourages – and looked to an engagement with architectural processes that are on the edges of established practice and education. This has led us to focus on 'making' as a primary element of the course and the introduction of a full-scale design and build project in the first semester of the first year.

The University is also based in a region that has one of the highest levels of economic and social deprivation in Europe. Therefore a core teaching premise is to work on 'live-projects' within the surrounding communities. These live projects while providing the student with valuable insight into real issues, also allows the community to benefit from creative proposals to complex issues. Outcomes from the projects across the years include; full-scale built structures, design ideas and developed proposals that can contribute to 'what if...'<sup>2</sup> scenarios and engage the wider community in

future visions for the environments in which they live, work and play.

As part of this approach we have developed a live-project structure that enables students to develop a design process through which they can gain valuable feedback from a community, while contributing to a dialogue about the potential for their design ideas to support the wider community's vision for their own neighbourhood. Included within this structure is *Connected Communities* a participatory design workshop that enables us to write project briefs in collaboration with the students and the communities in which we work.

## **Connected Communities**

Connected Communities is a two-day public workshop, which uses participatory design practices to look at ways of connecting disparate communities within towns, and considers possible futures for their town centres.

For *Connected Communities: Penryn*, we invited people who live and work in Penryn to talk and work collaboratively with the first and second year architecture students over a two-week period. As part of the process the students engaged in drawing out – metaphorically and literally – interventions in Penryn that would contribute to a sustainable and vibrant vision for the town.

## **Talking and Walking**

With a welcome from the Mayor and a challenge to the group to think beyond the conventional proposals, members of the Penryn community presented their ideas and visions for the Town. These presentations included a summary of reports and design guides



commissioned by official bodies, alongside ideas and proposals from local businesses and organisations and a series of personal views of living and working in Penryn. Students were then invited by three Penryn residents – local historians Chaz Wenmouth and John Kirby and artist Simon Persighetti of Wrights and Sites<sup>3</sup> – to join them on a series of walks around Penryn. Through these walks and talks the students engaged with the locality through the embedded perspective of the resident.<sup>4</sup>

### Drawing Out<sup>5</sup>

On the second day, students and Penryn community members worked on a 'big map' to identify sites that they thought would be important to focus on (see Fig .2). Ideas for these sites were then drawn out onto an A1 map of the area to become the 'brief' for the students to draw up in the afternoon, with the drawings exhibited at the end of the day.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the resulting ideas focussed on slowing down or stopping traffic using 'Commercial Road' as a route from Falmouth to Truro. One group proposed flooding this road so that it became a canal; stopping the traffic and bringing the waterfront into Penryn. Another group designed a linear park and market creating a link between an under-used car park and the town centre. Following the workshop the Mayor took this proposal to Cornwall Council to seek a way of opening up the link.

### Interventions

These initial ideas were used as the catalyst to develop design proposals for a community building for Penryn. Seven weeks later the students exhibited the forty-one design proposals at a local community hall.

The students' proposals addressed ways of drawing people into the heart of Penryn and connecting the town centre with 'Commercial Road'. Proposals varied in typology from swimming pools, a transport interchange, libraries, museums and a series of event spaces. A number of the projects looked at how the existing Penryn community and the new student community might integrate. Other projects looked at access to the Penryn River frontage and all of the proposals contributed to a vision for making a sustainable and vibrant Penryn.

This first *Connected Communities* project was run within the University town in 2015/16 and the

design ideas are now contributing to the evidence base for the town's Neighbourhood Plan.<sup>7</sup> The student's work will sit alongside ideas that come from a citizen participation project 'Taking Control of My Town',<sup>8</sup> a community animation project called 'Re-Imagine Your Town'<sup>9</sup> and existing community group projects.

Using the local context as a catalyst for this live-project work has helped our students to develop a socially engaged design process, which we hope will enable them to engage in 'eclectic'<sup>10</sup> working practices that in time, will disrupt conventional architectural practice.

### References

- 1 De Carlo, G. *An Architecture of Participation*. (The Melbourne Architecture Papers, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Victoria. 1972). In the opening pages of his 1972 lecture he states 'I believe that architecture in the future will be characterized by an increasing participation of the user in its organizational and formal definition. But, in an effort not to confuse my predictions with my hopes, I ought rather to say that in my opinion, contemporary architects must do everything possible to make architecture less and less the representation of its designers and more and more the representation of its users.'
- 2 Chiles, P, 'What if? ... A narrative process for re-imagining the city', in *Architecture and Participation*, ed. by Peter Blundell Jones, Donna Petrescu and Jeremy Till (London and New York: Taylor & Frances, 2005 and 2009), pp. 187-206.
- 3 Persighetti, S, < <http://www.mis-guide.com> > [accessed 26 June 2017].
- 4 Evans, J. and Jones, P., 'The Walking Interview: Methodology, mobility and place', in *Applied Geography* 31 (Elsevier 2011), pp. 849-858. They conclude their paper with the qualification that 'Walking interviews have been demonstrated as a highly productive way of accessing a local community's connections to their surrounding environment. This is critical because people's relationships with place keys into contemporary policy issues surrounding sustainability.' Pp 857.
- 5 In the initial stage of 'drawing out' both the students and residents were presented with a floor-sized sheet of blank paper. It became the process by which their joint experiences from the earlier walks could be documented. Once the roads and words were marked on the sheet, members of the community were asked to stand on the map at the point at which they would like the students to intervene. The students were then invited to join the community member at that site on the 'big map'. The later stage of the 'drawing out' process became the creation of a visual document that represented the joint vision for these sites.
- 6 Evans, J. and Jones, P., 'The Walking Interview: Methodology, mobility and place', in *Applied Geography* 31 (Elsevier 2011), pp. 849-858. They note that it is unusual for participants to be involved in the analysis of the resultant maps from their walking and talking interviews. The Drawing Out process offers a way for