

# Evaluating Client Learning through Live Projects: Innovations for Reflective Practice

**KEYWORDS** Client Learning, Co-Design, Learning through Practice, Live Project Pedagogy, Situated Learning Environments

## Abstract

A 2012 YouGov<sup>1</sup> survey suggested nearly three quarters of the UK general public do not truly understand the role of an architect. Add to this a perceived lack of integration between professions within the construction industry, poor public perception and low levels of client satisfaction, as highlighted by numerous publicly funded reports aimed at improving the built environment as a whole, and it becomes clear architects lack communication and advocacy skills. Flora Samuel<sup>2</sup> suggests the ever decreasing value being afforded architects is due to architects' inability to clearly articulate the role played and the importance thereof.

Many construction industry reports conclude with a range of explanations for the architectural profession being misunderstood and undervalued, along with suggestions to improve services. One aspect remains conspicuous by its absence throughout: what do clients and wider stakeholder teams learn? This paper illustrates that gaining a deeper understanding of these learning processes throughout an architectural project would create a new form of reflective practice aiding aggregation of original knowledge.

A pilot scheme engaged one client group from an architectural student live project. The aim was to understand the learning outcomes of all participants. Live projects offer an opportune vehicle to determine the value of such research as through their very nature they create 'Situated Learning Environments'<sup>3</sup> where all participants gain an understanding and appreciation for one another, thus providing a creative arena to investigate architectural ideas objectified by an inherent appreciation of the client.

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<sup>1</sup> **YouGov (2012)** *Architect Public Awareness Survey* [ONLINE] Available at: [inbuilding.org/cfs-file.ashx/\\_\\_key/communityserver-blogs-components-weblogfiles/00-00-00-00-07-2012-July/8154.inbuildingdotorg\\_2800\\_Architects\\_2900\\_.xls](http://inbuilding.org/cfs-file.ashx/__key/communityserver-blogs-components-weblogfiles/00-00-00-00-07-2012-July/8154.inbuildingdotorg_2800_Architects_2900_.xls). [Accessed 22 February 2019]

<sup>2</sup> **Flora Samuel (2018)** *Why Architects Matter; Evidencing and Communicating the Value of Architects*. London: Routledge: 238

<sup>3</sup> **Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger (1995)** *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

The breadth of outcome witnessed in the pilot sample was surprising, highlighting the validity of undertaking such research. It included tangible benefits such as the upskilling of clients to confidently engage with architects, plus implicit transformations in perception including a heightened understanding of the role architecture plays, even in areas of multiple deprivation. The process had shortfalls, mainly the methodologies utilised being susceptible to confirmation bias<sup>4</sup> and affect heuristic<sup>5</sup>, however through further investigation the approaches employed can be refined to ensure reliable data is eventually secured.

Despite the construction industry implementing improvements suggested through numerous reports, the architectural profession still finds itself misunderstood and undervalued. Innovative new approaches therefore need to be considered, such as client learning. Due to their inherent nature as situated learning environments, live projects provide a good starting point for exploring this opportunity, with the pilot scheme undertaken for this piece of research suggesting such comprehension may offer architects fresh opportunities to reinvigorate their practice, plus the ability to redress misperceptions and receding status.

## Introduction

The architect/client relationship is complex. Both strive for the same outcome, yet viewpoint, approach and value systems often differ dramatically. Numerous publicly funded reports aimed at addressing a perceived lack of integration between professions within the construction industry, poor public perception, low levels of client satisfaction, and improving health and Safety standards, including Latham<sup>6</sup>, Egan<sup>7</sup>, and Government Construction Strategies<sup>8 & 9</sup>, each provided a framework for systematically controlling relationships in an attempt to optimise construction activities and thus improve project performance. The methodologies briefly consider client behaviour, but never client learning. Similarly, Emmitt & Gorse<sup>10</sup> investigated behavioural

patterns in more depth, considering how members within a design team communicate, but focused more upon the temporal nature of transient interactions as opposed to learning outcomes for those involved.

In parallel, those outside the profession have little understanding of what architects do, illustrated by a 2012 YouGov<sup>11</sup> survey which found 72% of adults interviewed were unaware architects applied for planning permission, and 86% did not know architects select and manage contractors. As the champion of UK architects the RIBA has a remit to address this situation and intermittently undertakes initiatives. Its first significant enquiry was the three phase 'Strategic Study of the

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<sup>4</sup> **Peter Wason (1960)** *On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task.* Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 12 (3): 129–40

<sup>5</sup> **Robert Zajonc (1980)** *Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences.* American Psychologist. 35 (2): 151–175

<sup>6</sup> **Michael Latham (1994)** *Constructing the Team.* London: HMSO

<sup>7</sup> **John Egan (1998)** *Rethinking Construction.* London: DETR

<sup>8</sup> **Cabinet Office (2011)** *Government Construction Strategy 2011 – 2015.* London: HMSO

<sup>9</sup> **Cabinet Office (2016)** *Government Construction Strategy 2016 – 2020.* London: HMSO

<sup>10</sup> **Stephen Emmitt & Chris Gorse (2007)** *Communication in Construction Teams.* London: Taylor and Francis

<sup>11</sup> **YouGov (2012)** *Architect Public Awareness Survey* [ONLINE]

Available at: [inbuilding.org/cfs-file.ashx/\\_key/communityserver-blogs-components-weblogfiles/00-00-00-00-07-2012-July/8154.inbuildingdotorg\\_2800\\_Architects\\_2900\\_.xls](http://inbuilding.org/cfs-file.ashx/_key/communityserver-blogs-components-weblogfiles/00-00-00-00-07-2012-July/8154.inbuildingdotorg_2800_Architects_2900_.xls). [Accessed 22 February 2019]

profession'<sup>12,13 & 14</sup> which found that  
“...architects were generally not seen as good  
listeners, communicators or team players.”

In 2015 RIBA's 'Client & Architect;  
developing the essential relationship'<sup>15</sup> was  
published, with the subsequent 'Working with  
Architects' client questionnaire<sup>16</sup>. These  
surveys asked clients to reflect on their  
experiences, consider what could be improved,  
and suggested what architects could learn to  
improve the process, but the value of client  
learning was again overlooked.

In 'Why Architects Matter'<sup>17</sup> Flora Samuel  
suggests the ever decreasing value being  
afforded architects within the construction  
industry is due to architects inability to clearly  
articulate the role played and the importance  
thereof, “Currently architects generate much  
more value than they capture.” Samuel goes  
on to say a knowledge-led industry  
communicating the importance of design to  
everyone strengthens the architectural  
profession by evidencing its worth.

In The Farrell Review Alan Penn states  
“architects are not very good at explaining  
what they do and why that matters”<sup>18</sup>  
highlighting architecture's lack of  
communication and advocacy skills. Indeed  
the Farrell Review suggests throughout that  
architects should learn lessons from the world  
around them, including citing the medical  
profession who have vigorously disseminated

new knowledge and actively sought patient  
(i.e. client) feedback, learning and  
understanding. It does not however, discuss  
means through which this all powerful  
'learning' may take place.



figure 1: Co-design Workshop

As a response, this study uses situated learning  
environments<sup>19</sup> created through co-design<sup>20</sup> to  
provide opportunities for the role of architects  
to be better understood. The undertaking of  
live projects within architecture education  
breaks the binary relationship between student  
and tutor through the introduction of a client  
and subsequent creation of situated learning  
environments. The tripartite relationship  
between tutor, student and client is well  
documented, as are the beneficial values  
attributed to student learning, but the  
knowledge gained by a client is currently  
overlooked.

<sup>12</sup> **RIBA (1992)** *Strategic Study of the Profession: Phase 1: Strategic Overview*. London: RIBA Publications

<sup>13</sup> **RIBA (1993)** *Strategic Study of the Profession: Phase 2: Clients and Architects*. London: RIBA Publications

<sup>14</sup> **RIBA (1995)** *Strategic Study of the Profession: Phase 3: The Way Forward*. London: RIBA Publications

<sup>15</sup> **RIBA (2015)** *Client & Architect; developing the essential relationship*. London: RIBA Publications

<sup>16</sup> **RIBA (2016)** *What Clients Think of Architects*. London: RIBA Publications

<sup>17</sup> **Flora Samuel (2018)** *Why Architects Matter; Evidencing and Communicating the Value of Architects*. London: Routledge: 238

<sup>18</sup> **Tony Farrell (2014)** *The Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment*. London: DCMS: 65

<sup>19</sup> **Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger (1995)** *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>20</sup> **Elizabeth Sanders and Pieter Jan Stappers (2008)** *Co-creation and the new landscapes of design*, CoDesign, 4 (1): 5-18

### Client Learning as Innovation

There is a mismatch between what architects do and public perception. Equally there is a continuing marginalisation of architects within the construction industry. Together these factors prevent client groups and wider society from obtaining the built environment they desire and deserve. It might be argued therefore, that the short-term role of architects is to address these fundamental shortfalls in order to deliver the larger goal *fait accompli*.

One component of achieving this larger goal can be obtained through understanding what clients and their wider stakeholder teams learn during the process of working with an architect. The lack of such crucial knowledge to date is a key component in how the architectural profession currently finds itself, and should therefore be explored.

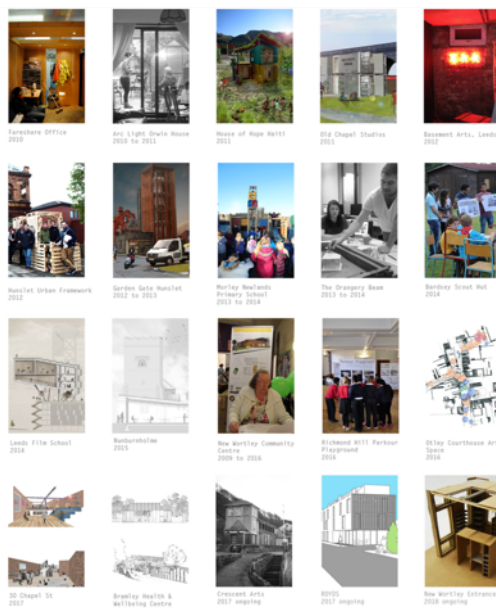


figure 2: Project Office Work

At present the value of client learning to architects is a hypothesis, having not previously been considered. This research seeks to determine whether the identified gap in knowledge of construction industry

professions is a fertile ground for further study by initially exploring the learning outcomes for clients involved with Leeds Beckett University's School of Architecture, and the live project programme facilitated by in-house RIBA Chartered practice Project Office.

The live projects undertaken through this programme are with non-profit organisations in desperate need of architectural input. Consequently client teams are generally composed of individuals with no previous experience of commissioning building projects, and can thus represent both general public and patron in their responses. The design phase of projects is short in nature, requiring intensive client engagement meaning they are heavily immersed within the co-design process. Consequently the reflective data gathered reveals a true learning process and foundations of an epistemology to be built upon with further investigation.

Through their very nature, architecture live projects create situated learning environments where all participants gain an understanding and appreciation for one another because learning is fundamentally a social process. The deep learning<sup>21</sup> which takes place can have positive and far-reaching consequences, as all who partake in the co-design are emancipated from their standard learning patterns to embrace the self-fulfilment such a process augments.

Consequently as a kinaesthetic microcosm for innovative practice, live project learning provides a creative arena to investigate architectural ideas objectified by an inherent appreciation of the client. Such comprehension may just offer architects fresh opportunities, plus the ability to redress misperceptions and receding status.

<sup>21</sup> **Phil Race (2005)** *Making Learning Happen*. London: Sage Publications

### **Pilot Scheme**

The engagement activities are in their early stages and consequently not discussed here in detail, however a small pilot scheme has been conducted with one client group; New Wortley Community Association (NWCA). Chosen due to having the longest standing relationship with Leeds School of Architecture, extant since 2009, and presiding over Project Office's largest built project to date for which 196 individuals contributed.



*figure 3: NWCA Client Team*

Six key client members were interviewed, with a focus group held for anyone else who wished to contribute, attended by twelve people. The discussions were based around the following questions:

1. What is your involvement with the client group and has that changed through the project?
2. How involved with the design process were you, and how inclusive did you feel it was?
3. What impact did the design process have on you and what did you learn from it?
4. What impact do you feel the project has had upon the local community?
5. What did you think of architects before the project and has that changed?
6. What did you think of Universities before the project and has that changed?

7. Given the experience you now have, what would you change if you did the project again?
8. What have you done since the project?

The outcomes ranged from the tangible:

- engaging an economically inactive individual suffering chronic anxiety to seek volunteering opportunities
- developing specialised skills in bid writing aiding continued successful applications
- increasing confidence enabling direct liaison with an appointed architect to clearly and articulately set out the community's aspirations

To the implicit:

- altered perception of universities and their role in society
- an increased sense of status having students invest their time in an under-privileged area
- valuing quality design and architecture

The findings listed are a precis of the most significant, but when investigated illustrate how powerful an experience working with construction industry professionals can be. Tangibly the upskilling NWHA members experienced has led to subsequent grants of over £1m for continued capital investment in Leeds' most deprived area<sup>22</sup>. The implicit results directly relate to Flora Samuels proclamation and YouGov poll results, proving a bottom up engagement approach between architects and clients with their stakeholder groups can begin addressing these issues.

### **Pilot Scheme Limitations**

The pilot scheme had certain oversights and highlights limitations within the methodology, the key aspects being:

<sup>22</sup> **Office of National Statistics (2011) Census 2011 Data.** [ONLINE] Available at:

[www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/wd501ew](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/wd501ew) [Accessed 03 March 2017]



1. With such significant numbers contributing to the project, the pilot engaged only a handful of stakeholders. To address this, the next stage of research will seek to engage a far larger percentage of participants.
2. The interviews took place over a staggered period of time resulting in an inconsistent questioning technique exacerbating the nascent unknowns. To address this, the next stage of research will conduct all engagements with a specific client group within one calendar month.
3. It is possible the interviewers, all members of the team who delivered the project, exhibited confirmation bias<sup>23</sup> to varying degrees due to preconceived notions of how successful the scheme had proved, and the determination to validate such beliefs. This selective perception can potentially lead questioning in a manner blind to negative contradictions of the preconceived idea. To address this, the next stage of research will see all members of a specific client group engage with a consistent team in more carefully planned sessions.
4. A long standing relationship with the client team meant interviewers likely suffered affect heuristic<sup>24</sup> through familiarity, resulting in the discussions reminiscing rather than truly analysing the learning outcomes to better understand what has been accomplished, and which aspects would benefit from increased consideration in the future. To address this, the next stage of research will utilise a wider range of engagement techniques to reduce the interviewer's influence.

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<sup>23</sup> **Peter Wason, (1960)** *On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task.* Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 12 (3): 129–40

Despite the shortfalls in the methods used to obtain data, the resultant findings are still insightful and multifaceted, indicating a larger and more consistent appraisal could result in a significant form of new awareness aiding the aggregation of practice knowledge. To this end a further reaching investigation will now take place, engaging all previous Project Office clients to ascertain the impact and learning outcomes for each group.



*figure 4: Architecture Consultation Day*

### **Live Projects as Methodology**

Understanding the pilot scheme limitations highlights aspects which must be addressed prior to the comprehensive engagement. The presence of more than one interviewer following a more structured interview proforma is likely to reduce the effect of subjective judgement, allowing greater focus on objective criteria and providing a more accurate representation of client learning.

Architecture live projects are inherently iterative and dynamic, such that the data collection methods employed must be equally agile. A range of methods can be used including inscriptive practices, cross-disciplinary working, interviews, community-based participation, and focus groups. Each methodology is underpinned from a theoretical stance, often grounded in sociological rather than architectural philosophies including

<sup>24</sup> **Robert Zajonc (1980)** *Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences.* American Psychologist. 35 (2): 151–175

ethnography, critical discourse analysis, grounded theory and the constructivist paradigm.

Conducting the data collection will itself facilitate an evaluation of these research methodologies to take place, determining which approaches prove most valid for continued future research. The knowledge gained will also provide informative opinion on engagement methods from a client perspective. Notions of co-design workshops, questionnaires, activity days, exhibitions, etc, can be considered from the client viewpoint to understand which are felt to be most inclusive, successful, and positively impactful.



figure 5: Creative Writing Workshop

## Reflections

The architectural profession has found itself misunderstood by the general public, and undervalued by the construction industry. Many factors need to be addressed to fully rectify this position, with most having previously been identified by the writings discussed in this paper, plus many others, without the required effect. Innovative new approaches therefore need to be considered, such as client learning which is conspicuous by its absence in the aforementioned reports.

This paper suggests gaining a deeper understanding of client learning processes throughout an architectural project would create a new form of reflective practice aiding aggregation of creative knowledge. Due to

their inherent nature as situated learning environments live projects provide a good starting point for both examining the relationship between practice and client, and exploring the value client learning may offer architects.

The pilot scheme results illustrate a surprising range of outcomes, most of which would not generally be expected through engagement with a construction project and thus highlighting the validity of undertaking such research. An architectural legacy is therefore far greater than just the building, it is also the implicit impacts the process can have on those involved. To make explicit, a reflective engagement process is necessary, an opportunity presently overlooked and not understood by architects.

The pilot scheme also highlights potential pitfalls in gathering true information through confirmation bias and affect heuristic. These issues will be considered during the next phase of research engaging with all Project Office clients through a range of methodologies.



figure 6: NWCA Stakeholder Diagram

Whilst the research of understanding client learning is in its infancy, as a speculation for how architectural innovation might be developed going forward, the pilot findings encourage a reflective practice to occur which may enable architects to both communicate more fruitfully with clients, and begin addressing understood threats to the

profession. Thus to capture the evidence Flora Samuel suggests is required for the architectural profession to convey its importance, an obvious starting point beckons: ask the client what they learnt.

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