

# ***From Civic Responsibility to Socio-Spatial Civic Agency: Critiquing the Civic University Movement through live projects***

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## ABSTRACT

*Through exploration of Birmingham School of Architecture & Design's pioneering live project programme, this paper presents a commentary on the potential of architecture and design education in achieving the ambitions of the Civic University Movement. We argue that the evolution of these projects represents a shift from working, 'for', to working, 'with', the city. It posits a dialogic two-way exchange to change the way we think about how universities engage with the city, and equally how cities engage with universities.*

## KEYWORDS

*live projects, civic university, community, participatory design, civic agency*

## I n t r o d u c t i o n

Universities have long been seen as having civic responsibility to the cities and communities of which they are part.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations New Urban Agenda identifies that cities should aim to be:

participatory, promote civic engagement, engender a sense of belonging and ownership among all their inhabitants, prioritize safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces that are friendly for families, enhance social and intergenerational interactions, cultural expressions and political participation, as appropriate, and foster social cohesion, inclusion and safety in peaceful and pluralistic societies, where the needs of all inhabitants are met.<sup>2</sup>

As anchor institutions, places of education, economic powerhouses and major employers in cities globally, universities have a key role to play in this transition. However, their teaching and research have often been carried out isolated from their cities, to be later applied as profitable products or services.<sup>3</sup> Local engagement is commonly mobilised through *outreach* and *engagement* activities, which aim to share and apply the expertise and knowledge generated by the university in its communities and beyond. Generally conceived of as a one-direction path from the university communities can be seen as passive recipients of this knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The recent emergence of the *civic university* is one model challenging this approach. It encourages universities to work in partnership, becoming both 'in' and 'of' the city, applying their knowledge and innovation in the context of their localities.<sup>5</sup> But what might this mean for educators, and what pedagogical approaches can universities develop to become more civic?

In this paper, we explore Birmingham School of Architecture & Design's pioneering 'live' project programme as an exemplar of civic engagement with impact in the city and beyond. Live projects have gained significant momentum in recent years and have increasing legitimacy as a mode of educational practice, a shift previously documented in *Charette*.<sup>6</sup> Live projects are distinct from much other academic learning in their engagement with external collaborators with real needs from outside the academy. They bring together architectural students, educators, stakeholders and non-architects in cooperation to generate an outcome that is of benefit to all parties. They aim to develop a critical position bridging the divide between education and practice and aiding the development of professional and collaborative skills which are otherwise difficult to simulate in the academy.<sup>7</sup> Usually carried out in groups, knowledge is generated through an inherently social process of collaboration and peer learning.<sup>8</sup> This introduces different problems and possibilities for the student designer compared to working alone, such as group dynamics, team roles, responsibilities and cooperative problem-solving.<sup>9</sup> In their engagement in a *real life* context with real timescales, students gain a valuable understanding of the realities of practice but also of different world views, negotiating conflicts of interests, uncertain knowledge

and contradictions.<sup>10</sup>

From their foundation in the 1950s to their present incarnation as the Collaborative Laboratory (Co\LAB), we explore how live projects at the Birmingham School have evolved from a pioneering mode of replicating practice in the academy through design-build experiments and construction, to interdisciplinary cultural creation and research, and into a form of 'spatial civic agency'.<sup>11</sup> These situated, action-based projects are founded on partnerships between community organisations, academics, students, creative practitioners, and local people in a shared process of knowledge generation, skills development and active engagement with the city, creating positive change in and with the city and region. We position Co\LAB as an exemplar of a locally engaged civic approach that exemplifies the ambitions of the civic university, creating a critical, collaborative and dialogical connection between the university and the communities and organisations it seeks to serve.

### The civic university

Rooted in their educational and social principles, universities have historically played a significant role in the life of cities.<sup>12</sup> Civically-oriented institutions were established across the UK in rapidly industrialising Victorian cities such as Newcastle, Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow, Manchester and Cardiff, with a mission to provide professional, cultural and intellectual education for the growing middle classes of Victorian society.<sup>13</sup> Today, universities continue to play an important role in their communities through their teaching and research work and have a wider impact on the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of the places in which they are located.<sup>14</sup> The notion of academia's civic responsibility has seen a considerable resurgence, led by the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) Foundation's Civic University Commission, launched in May 2018. The commission aimed to consider how rejuvenated civic universities could engage with the challenges facing the local communities in which universities are located.<sup>15</sup> Its findings identify that to be considered a civic university, an institution's activities need to be a result of a 'clear strategy rooted in analysis', based on an understanding of what their 'local' is and who their civic actors are.<sup>16</sup> The engaged university:

is one which provides opportunities for the society of which it forms part. It engages as a whole with its surroundings, not piecemeal; it partners with other universities and colleges; and is managed in a way that ensures it participates fully in the region of which it forms part. While it operates on a global scale, it realises that its location helps to form its identity and provide opportunities for it to grow and help others, including individual learners, business and public institutions, to do so too.<sup>17</sup>

Not every university articulates their civic contribution in the same way and there are many reasons why universities sign up to Civic University Agreements. The underlying ethos is to root their activities in exchange with, and impact in, their specific place:

research has socio-economic impact designed in from the start and teaching has a strong community involvement with the long-term objective of widening participation in higher education. Most importantly there is a soft, flexible boundary between the institution and society.<sup>18</sup>

In the post-Covid era, the rallying cry from the UK Government and policy think tanks is to 'build back better' and 'level up' regions beyond the capital, with a growing emphasis on prioritising the development of resilient and inclusive communities.<sup>19</sup> The Civic University Commission has further suggested that universities should focus on their role in less economically and socially advantaged communities such as post-industrial towns, and engage with specific local challenges such as high street regeneration.<sup>20</sup> In a period of post-Covid recovery, McNulty and Goddard suggest civic universities should strive to support recovery by:

- Sharing power with communities;
- Helping people thrive, and just not cope, by changing practices;
- Changing organisations to focus on communities and solutions;
- Collaborative leadership to achieve systemic change.<sup>21</sup>

Locally grounded projects and a focus on engaging with those most affected by societal challenges such as inequality, climate change, and other crises, can empower those communities to imagine their own futures.<sup>22</sup> This necessitates close collaboration with communities, organisations and stakeholders through sharing of knowledge and expertise.

### **Exploring Birmingham City University's civic ambitions**

As set out in its 2025 Strategy, Birmingham City University (BCU)'s ambition is to be the University for Birmingham, working as an integral part of its communities: responding to their needs and aspirations, acting as a resource, and providing an impetus for change.<sup>23</sup> BCU's Public and Community Engagement (PCE) Strategy sets out four thematic pillars of PCE activity: partnership to advance growth and innovation; championing and supporting diversity; knowledge making, sharing and exchange; and cultural and creative identity.<sup>24</sup> While not a signatory to a Civic University Agreement, these ambitions closely align with those of the Civic University Movement and express a sense of civic responsibility to the city.

The Birmingham School of Architecture and Design (BSoAD), part of BCU's Faculty of Arts, Design and Media, has a long history of civic engagement through live projects. Drawing on this history in relation to the emerging model of the civic university, in this paper we explore the school's early

	Design-Build / Design-make	Cultural & Civic Research & Creativity	Spatial Civic Agency & Community Engagement	Other (e.g. knowledge exchange, teaching)
2011	BAA Showcase Hayes Bridge LAB Shop			
2012	digital landscapes Hayes Cave Trail Box of Delights Guerilla Ecology Buro Landschaft MG: St.Chads			
2013	LAB Mobile Flatpack Palais aluminium tectonics Chaddesley Pavilion Social Mobility Data analytics Stonehouse Gang The Ramp MG: Dudley Zoo Tomorrow's Towers			
2014	BOM Centrala BAAD Space AoBAS Aluminium tectonics Hidden Spaces MG: Bournville St.Edmunds Birmingham Production Space			
2015	Curzon Italian Qtr Trends Pavilion Malvern Dining Room Wyre Forest Health Town Open Platform St.Edmunds Aluminium tectonics MG: BMAG Zero Carbon Design Stirchley High St Collaborative Design Toolkit			
2016	Digital Fashion Pop Music Archive Pocket Park Wyre Forest Zero-Carbon MG: Public Art Minerva Works UnPublic Works Knowledge Hub aluminium tectonics St.Edmunds			
2017	Production Make: Do MG: Expanded City Latrine Dream Knowledge Exchange Hartlebury Castle Destination Wayfinding Brick Assembly Zero Carbon Design 100 Stones Transit Spaces Free City Guide Futuremakers			
2018	MG: Grace Separation Critical Pedagogies Knowledge Exchange Bhm Mod Soc Map Unfinished Article Keeley Travel Edit/Or Antigona 100 Stones Future Workspace Innovative urban Lighting Brick Project Playground of Hyper Realities Wellbeing Community Gardens STEAMhouse			
2019	Knowledge Exchange The Brick Project St. Edmunds Mentoring Modern Gazetteer Real Homes - Real People CUCE Adventures in Hybrid realities Wellbeing Community Gardens: HBVC Future Workspace Synaesthetic Dining Zolid Surface Concrete RIP			
2020	Knowledge Exchange St Edmunds Mentoring Abiotic Gardens Ascension Hall of Innovation Langley Hall Park Connected Chelmsley Cucina Futurista Forensic Archetypes Future Workspace - Steamhouse			
2021	Earth Summit Packaging Possibilities Sensory Narrative Devices Transreality: Digital Curation Gramer Haor Jewellery Multiplicity High Street 2030 Frameworks for Environmental Justice Podcast Knowledge Exchange Re-imagined Prototypical Bio-Box Brickwerk Retrofit Co-Reality Frameworks for Environmental Justice			
2022	Fury 56 Green Infrastructure Vision Shape of Touch Ruthin Future Gramer Haor			

Table 1:  
CoLAB projects since 2011,  
categorised by project theme  
(CoLAB 2022).

pioneering live projects and their current incarnation in the multi-faceted Co\laborative Lab:oratory (Co\LAB) live project initiative as a contemporary exemplar of civic engagement.<sup>25</sup> The module has run over 120 elective projects with over sixty collaborative partners and over 1,300 students from 15 BCU courses over ten years (Table 1). Approximately ten projects are curated each year for mixed cohorts of undergraduate and postgraduate

students from across courses.

Through analysis using the school's archive, Co\LAB's online database, project narratives, process blogs, and student reflections, we trace the changing nature of the projects, drawing out emerging trends in relation to the civic university and the impact of projects on students, collaborators, the city region and its communities. What is presented here as stages of evolution, is in fact messy and contingent. The nature of the project and its electives is that the trends have emerged slowly as Co\LAB and its electives evolved in response to the changing academic, societal and civic landscape and ongoing connections to external organisations that have currency in exploring these shifts. Finally, in the discussion, projects are codified against McNulty and Goddard's four principles to explore how the evolution of live projects at BSoAD aligns with the ambitions of the Civic University Movement.

## Birmingham School of Architecture & Design's civic foundations

As one of the oldest schools of architecture in the UK, the Birmingham School emerged from a pioneering enthusiasm to create a self-help education based on the model of evening classes established at the Architectural Association (AA) in London.<sup>26</sup> An early alliance between Birmingham Architectural Association (BAA) and the AA saw this model adopted before, in 1892, the BAA formalised its relationship with the Birmingham School of Art, becoming an independent vocational college housed within the Birmingham School of Art's Margaret Street building. A founding principle of the school was to serve the local profession and it emerged with an independent spirit and radical aspiration which continued through its growth in the early Twentieth century.

The first known live project commenced at the Birmingham School of Architecture in 1951, designed to teach architecture that 'was both practical, academic and intellectually aspirational'.<sup>27</sup> Newly appointed head of the school, Dudley Jones, employed a number of young *modern educators* who brought an entrepreneurial spirit to the school's curriculum. This was a reflection of the rapid change and innovation occurring in the city in the post-war era, a period of significant change and innovation which the school embraced.

Early live projects were facilitated through 'conglomerate builds', compressed and truncated structures created by students at 1:1 scale in the studios or the grounds of Margaret Street (Fig.1). These experiments were designed to enable students to appreciate proportion, colour and material in addition to developing a haptic understanding of conventional construction techniques. The conglomerates were followed by increasingly large-scale design projects initially drawn and detailed by second-year students and delivered by local builders in the suburbs of Birmingham. In a later development, third-year students undertook on-site construction, getting hands-on with the building

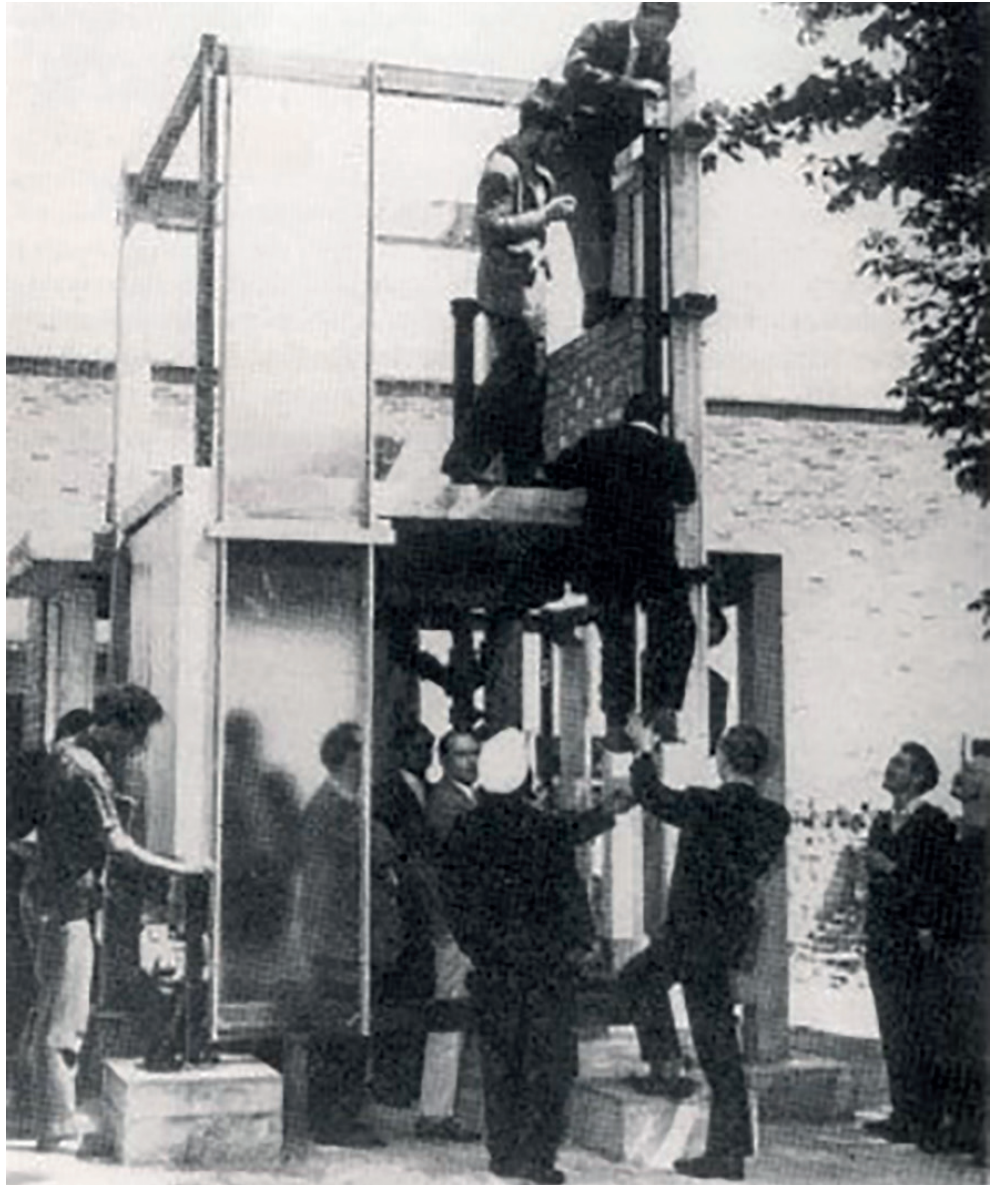


Figure 1:  
Upper school 'conglomerate'  
(Architects' Journal 1961).

process. Projects such as terraced housing in Rednal and Selly Oak, and nurses' homes at Weston-Under-Wetherle, were delivered as collaborations between the school and the Birmingham Corporation with a focus on emulation of professional practice: 'the point was to have the student ask, at every stage of the design, how would this be constructed?'.<sup>28</sup>

Over a twelve-year period, at least 22 projects were undertaken by students across Coventry, Walsall, Quinton and the wider West Midlands region.<sup>29</sup> This pioneering civic approach had a direct physical impact on the city and a lasting legacy; many of the buildings survive to this day and are still occupied. However, the live project venture divided opinions.<sup>30</sup> While their great potential as an accompaniment to normative design studio was recognised by educators and the RIBA, the Birmingham schemes became 'a quite un-collaborative process, and while [they] introduced students to real clients, almost all were local authorities with whom there was no critical examination

of the brief.<sup>31</sup> In fact, students worked to produce designs for pre-arranged contracts between councils and commercial builders. Student outputs substituted for the planning stages of the design and construction process for contractors to tender against. While offering the opportunity for students to work on real-life projects, the hands-on and innovative nature of the early conglomerate builds became replaced by a replication of the normative professional practice of the time. It is likely that the departure of Dudley Jones, the head of the school who had championed live projects, allied with the complexities of organising the projects within the curriculum, ultimately led to their cessation in 1962.<sup>32</sup>

### **Co\LAB: reviving the Birmingham School's live project tradition**

Almost fifty years on, the Birmingham School relaunched its live projects through Co\LAB, the Co\laborative Laboratory. Founded in 2011, initially to fill a gap within the curriculum and course structure, what started as a teaching module quickly became a multi-faceted initiative across the school, combining teaching, research and enterprise.

Since the live build experiments of the 1950s, schools of architecture globally have established 'live projects' as a mode of teaching to provide students with an element of real life that can be difficult to replicate in a studio environment. As the RIBA report 'Building Futures' identified, the profession is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and collaborative.<sup>33</sup> However, the format and assessment of normative design studios have historically focused on producing 'the solitary genius, rather than today's collaborator' and the design studio has been criticised as remote from real-world experiences of the types of relationships that occur in practice.<sup>34</sup> Other schools of architecture had established live project teaching programmes within the main architectural curriculum e.g. Oxford Brookes University, or as semi-autonomous organisations e.g. Sheffield School of Architecture. At the same time, limited opportunities to produce architectural work during a long period of economic recession and austerity were raising questions of how architects might participate in the transformation of our environments at a time when they were increasingly 'marginalized from the process of real decision-making'.<sup>35</sup> Through collaborative and action-based design and research, all participants in the process can coalesce around a real-life problem to create the shared knowledge and skills necessary to make positive physical and/or social changes to their place. As a school, we wanted to explore methods to achieve this shift, so students were ready to engage in alternative modes of creative production alongside architecture – not as a failsafe, but to imagine new opportunities for learning and for our future built environment.

### **Early projects: continuing a design-build focus**

In 2011, several live design projects were set up to address these concerns.



These were often independent optional projects but all shared an intent to offer students an alternative design experience during their studies. Hayes Bridge (2011), the school's first built live project of the Co\LAB era, engaged students in the design and construction of a small footbridge in The Hayes, near Stone, Staffordshire. The bridge was part of a wider programme for The Friends of the Hayes to provide safe access to their stream and woodland for recreational and educational use. The client sought to strengthen their ecological approach by using green timber from felled trees adjacent to the site, reinforcing the notion of sustainability and reusing local materials for the benefit of the community. Students used the material to prototype potential designs before selecting a final proposal to take forward to construction. Securing funding from St.Modwen's Environmental Trust, staff subsequently coordinated the live build on site (Fig.2).

The project engaged students and academics in working for a community organisation in a one-directional transfer of skills, time and knowledge to a place-based problem. While creating a positive impact in The Hayes, the value of early 1-to-1 scale design-build projects was in getting students hands-on with material and making in a process which recalls the conglomerate builds.

Following the success of the project, in 2012 Co\LAB was formalised as taught modules in the BA (Hons) Architecture and MArch Architecture courses. The first projects continued the design-build trajectory with a focus on temporary events and exhibitions and a focus on the challenge of integrating 1-to-1 builds within the demands of contemporary university courses.

The Flatpack Palais (2013) was typical of these early projects. A collaboration with the Flatpack Festival, an annual film and cinema event housed in unique venues across the city, students were set the brief to design and construct a temporary palais – a multifunctional cinema space and bar – in a converted library in Digbeth. The festival celebrated the works of the Birmingham Arts Lab, a 1970s experimental art collective that created make-shift art spaces for cultural gatherings and theatrical performances. The Flatpack Palais project was as much about connecting their work to the past heritage of make-shift arts spaces in the city, as it was about learning the practical and teamwork skills needed to execute temporary structures (Fig.3 and 4).

In these early live projects pedagogy remained focused on built product rather than process, be that a building design, feasibility study, temporary installation, or event.<sup>36</sup> Other projects during this formative period included working with the Stonehouse Gang on a redesign of an original 1950s live project for a community hall in Selly Oak, and Birmingham Hidden Spaces, an exhibition in the derelict Curzon Street Station with Associated Architects. The projects engaged students with hands-on making, practical construction and materials while creating opportunities to apply negotiation and teamworking skills. While the experience was closer to professional practice than normative design studios and engaged students with real-



3 : Construction

Figure 2:  
The Hayes Footbridge -  
construction sequence  
(CoLAB 2011).



*Figure 3:*  
The Flatpack Palais under  
construction (Alessandro  
Columbano 2013).



*Figure 4:*  
The finished Flatpack Palais in use  
for a film showing (Co\LAB 2013).

world constraints, their focus was more around developing projects for the client organisations in an emulation (albeit smaller in scale and sometimes temporary) of a typical practice project. Early live builds shared connections with the conglomerate tests, from their freestyle assemblage methods to folly-like freestanding structures. Social learning was centred around making, and generating discussions on how to complete tasks between groups live, in real-time, rather than delegation to specialists or fabricators. The ambitions and impact of these projects were rooted in the shadow of our own history of live projects at the school; this new generation of projects stirred interest to look retrospectively into local archives and secondary resources to re-establish these connections and create knowledge of approaches to civiness for the city's heritage in smaller, meaningful endeavours. Birmingham has had

a focus on promoting major cultural events in recent years and seeing itself as a festival city. Its impetus was on the cultural offering for the public and Co\LAB was capitalising on the emerging ecosystem of smaller arts organisations that contributed to the city's cultural offer. Our learning here, whilst similar in pedagogic ambitions, turned to the creative sector instead of the public-private arrangements from the original 1950s projects.

### F o s t e r i n g   c u l t u r a l   a n d   c i v i c   c r e a t i v i t y

In 2015 the emphasis of the modules shifted. Birmingham School of Architecture relocated to Eastside and incorporated 3D design into its portfolio, evolving into an interdisciplinary school of architecture and design. Co\LAB was integrated into BA(Hons) Landscape Architecture in 2015, and the Product Design and Interior Design programmes in 2016. All second-year students and first-year postgraduate students studying these courses take the module, creating an opportunity to work on inter- and trans-disciplinary projects through collaborative working practices in cross-subject groups, aided by shared academic structures and module parameters.<sup>37</sup>

Co\LAB projects began to explore the notion that the future of the design professions is rooted in collaboration, disruption and entrepreneurship.<sup>38</sup> Projects strived to go beyond an emulation of professional practice, occupying an 'interstitial space between disciplines' through their involvement of a broader range of courses and external collaborators.<sup>39</sup> Projects were increasingly seen as collaborative 'test beds', allowing students to explore what collaboration means in an industry where 'decentralized decision making, information sharing, teamwork and innovation are key'.<sup>40</sup> From its reputation for 1-to-1 scale structures, the practice expanded into more complex briefs where partners engaged with the school as a point of research and experimentation. Projects intervened across the city and explored issues of liveness: the relevancy of the creative arts, and the limits and crossovers between its disciplines – developing new creative practices to explore contemporary issues that affect the urban environment. At the same time, electives increasingly engaged with or resulted in research and enterprise activity, generating tangible impact on policy and the city.

The school's proximity to Digbeth, with its concentration of creative, industries made this a natural evolution and a strong contribution to the creative culture of the city. This approach is rooted in Birmingham's motto - Forward - and its coat of arms flanked by two supporting figures representing the arts and industry.<sup>41</sup> Projects such as Production Make Do (2017) exemplify this approach, combining the city's creativity with its industrial heritage. Working with fabricators Ash & Lacy, a local manufacturer of aluminium cladding systems, and visual artists Peter Nencini and James Langdon, the project developed a site-specific façade system for Eastside Projects, a leading independent art gallery in the heart of Digbeth. Initial physical prototypes defined a process of combining an existing scaffolding framework with new

interchangeable elements (Fig.5 and 6). A particular focus on the engineering of the system was combined with consideration of how a prototype could be exhibited in the gallery as a site-specific artwork as part of Eastside Projects' Production Show Phase 2.

Other projects developed critiques of the city and its redevelopment. Conc(re)te.RIP, one of a series of projects exploring the modernist and brutalist architecture of the city, was delivered as a collaboration with artist Gareth Barnett and BAAAD Press. Starting with the digitised ruins of John Madin's recently demolished Birmingham Central Library, it aimed to create a space to speculate on alternative scenarios from which to reimagine our relationship to the materials of our urban landscape, developing ideas around the 'archive' as a site of production and questions of ownership in the age of digital-piracy. The project evolved as a transdisciplinary process between the architecture, design and art schools presented through multiple media, from Instagram to film work to workshops, for the 'Duplicate: Artist Publishing Fair', ending with an exhibition at Eastside Projects in May 2019 (Fig.7).

With the expansion of the module, instruments of academia such as flexible student groupings, open learning outcomes, and coordinated timetabled experiments gave an element of freedom which benefitted innovative design thinking. The broadening of the module to include other disciplines, both within the school and beyond, encouraged interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration with a broader network of artists, creatives, cultural producers, arts organisations and venues. The curation and exhibition of explorative processes - alongside the process of collaboration itself - became as important as the product in a distinct shift from earlier Co\LAB live build projects. Engagement with cultural organisations yielded a significant impact in the city, for example, through the Birmingham Production Space project (2015) with Eastside Projects. This laid the foundations for STEAMHouse (phase 1), a 1,650m<sup>2</sup> ERDF and Arts Council England funded innovation centre in a former car showroom on Digbeth High Street. Run by BCU and Eastside Projects and designed by Co\LAB and Associated Architects, the centre hosts studio, offices and workshops for artists, designers and Small-to-Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) to prototype and develop new products and works. Fostering civic creativity has had measurable impact; to date it has supported over 200 SMEs, artists and designers, and created over 30 research collaborations.<sup>42</sup> It was recognised as a key case study for the West Midlands Industrial Strategy and aligned strongly with UPP's Civic University Agreement principles.

In collaborating beyond discipline, engaging students from different courses with cultural organisations, artists, industrial partners and more, students both gain an understanding of their training in relation to others but also of the value of an expanded disciplinarity in the creative industries. Students are assessed on the process of the project and a reflective log of their role in the collaboration in relation to their discipline. Drawing on reflective



Figure 5:  
Students visiting Ash & Lacy to understand the material process (Alessandro Columbano 2017).



Figure 6:  
The scaffold façade with interchangeable signage element (Alessandro Columbano 2017).

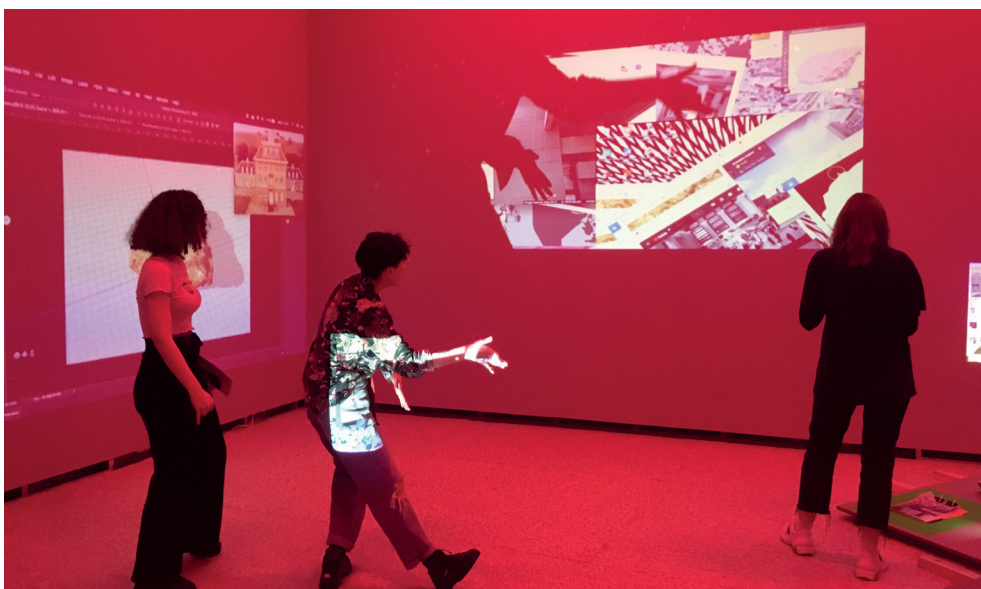


Figure 7:  
Conc(re)te.RIP exhibited at Eastside Projects (Alessandro Columbano 2019).

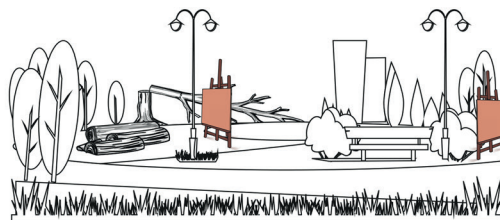
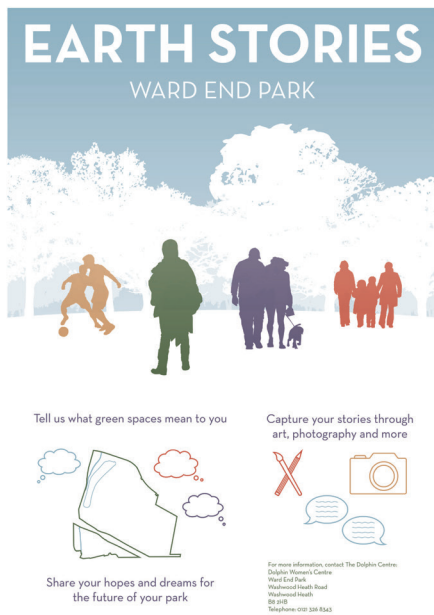
practices, experiential and action-based learning methods, students enrich their knowledge of their chosen specialism, diversify their understanding of how to 'do' a creative process (techniques), and become more considerate of the unintended social outcomes their spatial or intellectual work produces. Projects began to align with the principles of civic university, aiming to change practices and develop innovative solutions to societal issues – with a focus on the arts - in collaboration with local cultural organisations and producers. Co\LAB's position as a contributor to the ecosystem was critical in providing a civic role as a research space for engagement between creative practitioners, students, and the wider public. The dissemination of the work through more experimental formats of exhibitions and transdisciplinary projects expands the conversation of how the arts contribute to the development of the city, as indicated by the growing economy of the creative industries and Birmingham established as the most entrepreneurial region outside of London.<sup>43</sup>

#### Engaging with societal challenges: toward socio-spatial civic agency

Since 2020 a third strand of projects has emerged, engaging in collaborations with socially minded community groups and organisations in the city. With a growing consciousness of a 'perfect storm' of challenges affecting the UK and its communities - Brexit, the climate and biodiversity emergency, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Covid-19 pandemic - the need to work not only *for* but also *with* Birmingham has increasingly influenced the direction of the elective projects. These projects expand Co\LAB toward a model civic initiative with clear parallels to the Civic University Movement.

Taking place in 2021, High Street 2030 was a collaboration with CoLab Dudley, a social innovation lab based on Dudley High Street. Constrained by the Covid-19 pandemic, the project took place in a virtual learning environment. The students worked through online participatory processes to imagine and prototype a high street built upon regenerative design principles with a positive and interdependent relationship between humans and the living world.<sup>44</sup> Collaborating with CoLab Dudley and their wider community of Time Rebels empowered both students and community members to share resources and information and imagine futures together in a two-way process, generating new knowledge toward positive change. Future visions ranged from new technology-led approaches to community-led re-imaginings of the high street as a social space and speculations about the reclaiming of the street by nature and wildlife (Fig.8).

Frameworks for Environmental Justice (2020-22) aimed to investigate creative frameworks to improve the quality of life for members of the Ward End community in Birmingham through consideration of the political, economic and social dimensions of environmental justice. Collaborating with Birmingham City Council, the Dolphin Centre, a charity working with women with English as a second language, and Future Parks Birmingham, students set



Art stations - Art stations can be setup around the park or within the Dolphin Centre to help people express there stories through visual language.



Figure 8: My Street 2030: Student visions for the future of Dudley High Street (Co\LAB 2020).

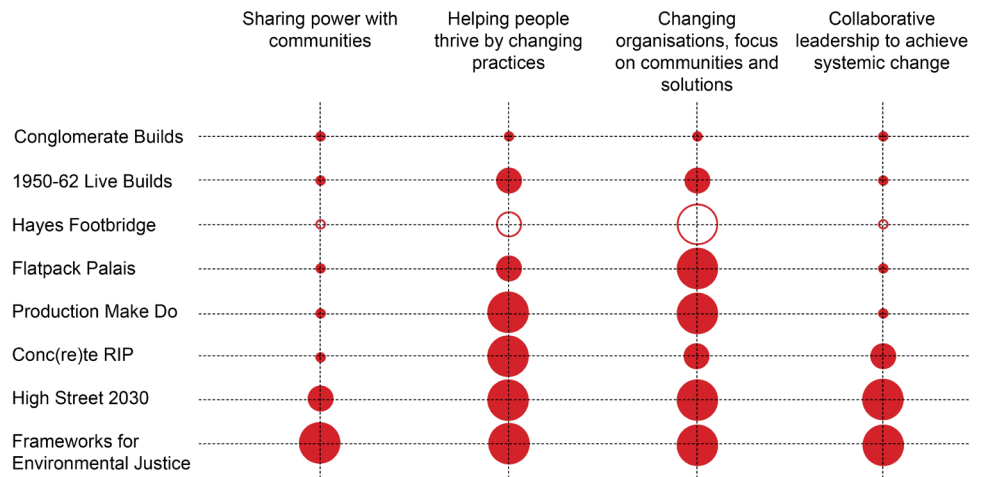
Figure 9: Outputs from the Frameworks for Environmental Justice Co\LAB (Co\LAB 2020).

out to understand the challenges faced within the Ward End neighbourhood, before testing tools to engage the community in thinking about their local green spaces. The collaboration prototyped methods of non-language-based participation, including visual guides for participation workshops, a workshop using disposable cameras, and the use of drawing and painting to capture emotional responses. Students acted as a mediator and catalyst between local communities and the council, taking an in-between position between the professional world and the every day and empowering potentially 'hard to reach' local people to share their stories, encouraging debate about the future of the neighbourhood (Fig.9).

These later projects engage with the city as a locus for teaching, research and engagement that aspires to go beyond a one-directional transfer of



Table 2:  
BSoAD Live Projects mapped  
against McNulty & Goddard's  
principles of a civic university  
(Co\LAB 2022).



knowledge toward a two-directional learning process for all participants. Learning goes beyond discipline, and includes aspects such as collaboration, public engagement, exhibition design, visualisation and much more, with an ambition to establish an inclusive approach to knowledge production, 'that is not limited to academia and its ways of knowing'.<sup>45</sup> Working 'in the city' can enable students to see their work valued by those beyond the institution, developing a situated and action-based education engaged with real contexts. This can be described as a form of *spatial civic agency*, where we understand agency as the capacity to make changes to the environment. This is seen as a process of engaging the citizen as co-creator; engaging with public and community places; understanding and valuing the lived experience of everyday life; and reconceptualising the role of the professional.<sup>46</sup> But with a strong emphasis on working with communities with an overt societal agenda, there is the opportunity to further define these engagements as forms of *socio-spatial civic agency*. This creates an expanded understanding of architecture and design in students and partners which sees the construction of space as a social as well as a physical practice.<sup>47</sup>

### Co\LAB as a model of civic engagement

Through the Co\LAB projects described, there is an identifiable shift in emphasis toward increased engagement with the city and its communities. From an early emulation of the design-build nature of the historic conglomerate builds, the module evolved into a vehicle for interdisciplinary engagement with cultural institutions and artists. Finally, we identify a recent shift toward engaging with community organisations and local people to critique the contemporary issues facing the city. The four principles identified by McNulty and Goddard offer a means to assess the success of the shift toward a collaborative, place-based model of practice, aligned with the civic university (Table 2):<sup>48</sup>

- *Sharing power with communities*: While early live projects can be seen as projects for clients, a shift toward working with the community and

giving citizens the power to shape their own environments has emerged. Understood as a form of socio-spatial civic agency, later Co\LAB projects shift the dynamic of knowledge production and education from a one-way sharing of knowledge from universities to communities to a situation where knowledge can be collaboratively produced in learning communities embedded within the spaces of the city. However, the projects suggest there remains a role for expert knowledge and skills in developing and visualising designs and communicating co-created ideas that can generate support for projects as they develop – for example visualising alternative futures for Dudley High Street, exhibiting the digitised fragments of the demolished Library, or in creating the tools to widen participation.

- *Helping people thrive, and just not cope, by changing practices:* The projects demonstrate the value of the university establishing direct connections to the community places of its city. The most successful Co\LAB projects both engage with local issues ‘on the ground’ and with councils or local government. From their in-between position between the academy, the communities of the city, cultural organisations and the professions, students act as connectors, mediators and sometimes provocateurs. Working with cultural organisations introduces a critical lens to explore contemporary issues in the city and to change practices, while collaboration with councils and community organisations has the potential to impact policy as well as create local transformation. This potential to shift understanding and nurture agency suggests an impact that could exceed the Civic University Movement and transform all involved in the process. In later projects, themes and outcomes focus on societal issues such as regenerative futures, environmental justice and sustainable development. Here, the aspiration is to sow the seeds for a step change toward sustainable and resilient futures which enable local places to thrive and prepare future professionals for a lifelong commitment to civic involvement.<sup>49</sup>

- *Changing organisations to focus on communities and solutions:* The weaving of new relationships and collaborations within and beyond the institution is critical – be they vertical, from national to the hyper-local, or horizontal, across sectors, disciplines, organisations, and communities.<sup>50</sup> Through collaboration across the public and private sectors, a socially driven approach is emerging that can have a deep impact on a community. Vertically, projects have engaged from policy makers such as the city council to cultural and community organisations, ultimately grounding in hyperlocal situations. Engaging horizontally has seen collaborations both across the school and faculty and transdisciplinary collaborations with cultural institutions, manufacturers, policymakers and creative industries beyond the academy. As a module, Co\LAB is open-ended and focused on processes rather than solutions (as reflected in its learning outcomes). This presents opportunities to test the boundaries of knowledge in a way that can be difficult to achieve in normative design studio modules. In later projects, this open-ended exploration has created critical dialogue. The ripples from these projects have impacted all participants, be they students, local people, community organisations or policymakers. While some partnerships only last for one module cycle, the most effective are sustained over several years, building trust between the collaborators.

- *Collaborative leadership to achieve systemic change:* The projects

demonstrate a forward-thinking approach to education that can empower students, community organisations and local people to deal with complex and often systemic challenges, reflect on their actions and create innovative responses together. As anchor institutions with a critical role in the city, and in strategically engaging with councils and cultural organisations, the university has the potential to influence policy, as seen in the STEAMHouse project. Simultaneously, tactically working with community groups and local people can empower inclusive change from below. In its most recent iteration, Co\LAB can be perhaps best described as a mediator-‘maneuvering’ between the strategic and the tactical, opening a space for collaborative debate, critique, and action - with the potential to lead to systemic change in the city.<sup>51</sup>

These four principles become increasingly evident in the projects as they evolve from design-build collaborations toward a socio-spatial civic agency. This starts to reveal the value of Co\LAB as a vehicle to create civic engagement with the city in an approach that is strongly aligned with the civic university model but, as seen in this hyper-local example, could also expand the role of a civic university.

In creating a ‘soft flexible boundary’ between institution and society, Co\LAB focuses not on transfer but on exchange and, fundamentally, the co-development of knowledge. A ‘soft and flexible boundary’ also exists between disciplines, where Co\LAB projects begin to merge activities and prompt transdisciplinary working across courses, faculties and with collaborators beyond the institution.<sup>52</sup> While the mid-century live projects filled the need of the Birmingham Corporation to build housing in the post-war period, now we set our agenda on broader, more local and sometimes even global issues. This is perceived as part of understanding architecture as a socio-spatial civic agency but equally in recognition of the important contribution schools of design have in responding to far-reaching global issues. The logic of agency combined with the pressing needs of the climate crisis (along with other social/cultural movements such as Black Lives Matter) has led to more radical activism, where changes are supporting a particular cause. This has introduced more of a critical project - which to some extent, challenges and unpicks the role of the profession. As the agency of Co\LAB has evolved, it has built up a network of like-minded organisations with a similar impetus on activism. This returns project outcomes as exchanges in transferable knowledge with the potential to transform attitudes, influence policy and the public, and encourage critical debate.

## C o n c l u s i o n

Universities have an important role to play in developing place-based practice, research, and teaching in collaboration with communities, and live projects are one means to this end. The documentation of one school of architecture & design’s journey through seventy years of live projects exemplifies something of the history of the movement and begins to suggest the changes

in prevailing views about architecture education, the relationship between the university and wider society, and even ideas about what constitutes education, and what it is for. It exemplifies the value architecture and design schools can bring in strengthening the local engagement of institutions with societal challenges, an important aspect of the Civic University Movement. As an exemplar of BCU's ambition to be the University *for* Birmingham, the experience of the past ten years of live projects demonstrates that BCU can meet the ambitions of the Civic University Concordat and should strive to become a signatory.

As projects and societal challenges become more complex and interconnected, the shift from civic engagement to the civic university to socio-spatial civic agency starts to suggest the dissolving of the boundaries between academia and the city and, indeed, the potential to dissolve the role of universities as distinct, isolated entities. Projects exist on a continuum of containment within, and dissolution of, boundaries - between everyday life and special events, between university and community, between disciplines, between professional expertise and co-created knowledge, between individual and group, and between student, tutor and collaborators. It does not just 'take students out' of the university (both physically and intellectually) but also 'invites others in' to take part in co-learning processes, exemplifying the potential of two-way exchange between academia and the local and global places they inhabit. In this way, CoLAB demonstrates the potential to enable students, academics, community organisations and communities to play a part in imagining the future of our local places, empowering all participants to become agents of change in the city.

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