

The art of placemaking

A recent project by postgraduate landscape architecture students at Leeds Metropolitan University explored vital questions about people and place through an arts-led approach. The results were diverse, intriguing and challenging



1 James Gordon,
Living Drainpipes

2 George Corbett,
Urban Myth

AS LECTURERS IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, we have a responsibility to stretch students' creativity by setting and shaping challenging projects. Core to this project was the questioning of professional assumptions and the need to move beyond formulaic design processes.

Interestingly, this project coincided with Martha Schwartz's interview in *Landscape* earlier this year in which she was critical that design is not "big on the agenda in schools". Other practitioners have also reminded us of the need for technically-orientated studies – at Leeds, we believe such studies need to be carefully balanced with creative, imaginative projects. Here, we strove to draw out students' imaginative responses to placemaking through artistic exploration, nurtured by tutors

who are also practising artists and designers.

Holbeck Urban Village provided an intriguing location to explore what Charles Landry might describe as "the complex art of city-making". Students took artistic risks to explore and reveal local identity through the creation of playful events and artefacts that also had a serious intent. Fifty years ago, Ian Nairn's book *Outrage* drew attention to the rise of suburbanisation, loss of identity and the dangers of mediocrity.

The exhibition of student work challenged the current erosion of local identity, bland projects and the cloning of our urban environments, which can be seen as products of our risk-averse society.

Professionals and locals visited the exhibition, hosted in a media centre that includes the

Academy for Sustainable Communities. It's important for us to share our ideas by holding exhibitions outside of the cosy confines of the university and in the community where we can encourage creative dialogue with a range of local people, arts and media professionals.

Students' work was characterised by a creative optimism that strove to understand the importance of an emotional response to place, rather than a lifeless technical exercise. The exhibition recorded the students' responsibility to be creative in the complex, messy, chaotic and diverse places that help shape the image and identity of our cities.

Edwin Knighton, Head of Landscape Architecture, Leeds Metropolitan University

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Art meets community

Holbeck Urban Village is immediately south of Leeds city centre and is undergoing major regeneration. Once part of the industrial revolution in Leeds, the area now aims to set new standards in sustainable development, creating jobs in the high-value digital and creative media sectors, as well as providing residential dwellings.

The postgraduate students undertook this project in the Holbeck Urban Village to challenge their usual design methodology and incorporate a more artistic approach to the production of ideas surrounding regeneration. The aim was to offer imaginative responses to two themes: the Urban Village as a physical or metaphorical 'connector' between the city centre and Holbeck and Beeston Hill, two areas adjoining the community; and the exploration of urban gardening as a social practice. Using these themes, students created interventions that sought to open up new points of contact and fresh dialogue between community, developer and city partners, rather than seeking to resolve or create end-points.

Such a dialogue has already been advanced in Holbeck by a number of artist-led ventures. In particular, activity has been initiated by Media and Arts Partnership (MAAP), a leading public art consultancy that creates opportunities for artists to work with public and private sector organisations within the context of city regeneration. A partnership between the university and director of MAAP Sue Ball was set up to guide the students towards this artistic vision. An exhibition of the highly accomplished body of student work was held at the Round Foundry Media Centre, demonstrating a diverse, creative approach, and a sense of play. /...

Trudi Entwistle, project co-ordinator



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1 Stefan Wanitschka Koenig
'Does every park have to be a car park?'

“Buildings and structures, deprived of their historic industrial functions, are falling apart; barbed wire protects overgrown emptiness. Car parks, parking meters and billboards have moved in – the landscape of abandoned cities has filled the void. Is parking all we have in mind?”
Billboards and walls were Stephan’s canvas, imagining a new landscape, with parks for people rather than cars.

www.flickr.com/photos/stefanwanitschkakoenig

2 Sarah Chapple, Appleseed

Sarah proposed working with local neighbourhoods to create a network of community orchards across the city. Within Holbeck, the proposed destination was elevated above ground level on a derelict viaduct. A small “art card” would be distributed throughout the community and a series of workshops held to explore our relationship with trees and begin this dialogue.

3 Hannah Lowther, Artefacts

Hannah exhibited objects found discarded in Holbeck, highlighting layers of hidden history. Some of the smaller artefacts were frozen in ice and handed out to the public in the city. As the ice melted, the artefacts were revealed and displaced again around Leeds./...

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1 [John Walker, The Routes, Shoots, and Fruits Project](#)

Inspired by the idea of forging new connections between places and people, John's project proposed the transformation of patches of neglected ground into productive urban gardens. Plants would be given temporary shelter in people's homes in preparation for community planting days. Plants would be delivered by milkmen and ice-cream men, reviving the dwindling practice of doorstep deliveries.

2 [George Corbett, Urban Myth](#)

George led a blue sheep on a random walk around Holbeck in an effort to create a modern urban myth. He wanted to connect the old tradition of turving the roofs of linen mills, where sheep were used as lawn mowers, with the ubiquitous blue of sleeping computer screens.

[Anne Wonsild, Abandoned Spaces \(not pictured\)](#)

Anne proposed a number of interactive installations in some of Holbeck's abandoned areas, each connecting with a location in the city where sound, light, colour or movement would be relayed live back to Holbeck. In one installation, a newly positioned bench in Holbeck is connected to an existing bench in the city centre. When the bench is occupied in the centre, a sign over the bench in Holbeck shows 'in use'. In another, a telephone box sits in a brownfield site. By dialling different numbers, one can listen to a selection of live sounds from the city – a musician busking, traffic, shopping or water splashing from a fountain. □



Trudi Entwistle is senior lecturer in landscape architecture at Leeds Metropolitan University and a practising artist in the public realm.