

# ***Ideas for Huyton: Education through collaboration***

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## ABSTRACT

*This article reflects on a collaborative live project in architectural studio teaching with undergraduate students in the Liverpool School of Architecture. The project involved an architecture practice, policy client, urban researchers and local communities on high street regeneration in Huyton, England. The project consisted of two design cycles, in which the first envisioned a temporary intervention and the second proposed three types of community-hubs. The stakeholders' input was channelled into the studio at several stages. The introduction of a live project collaboration with stakeholders creates a new beginning for architecture students who are about to embark on professional practice.*

## KEYWORDS

*collaboration, live project, high street regeneration, pedagogy*

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

The collaborative approach was introduced by the final year studio named Studio Pen & Inc within the undergraduate architectural programme in the Liverpool School of Architecture (LSA) during the 2021–22 academic year. It involved Huyton's local authority, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council (KMBC); an architectural practice, Architectural Emporium (AE); and LSA's Urban Form and Social Space (UFSS) research group. The studio was headed by Sandy Britton, supported by Sarah Green, Tony Lees, Giles Wheeldon and Stuart Gee and involved thirty students. The project searched for critical design thinking on sustainable regeneration strategies for Huyton's Derby Road which was facing a host of challenges post-pandemic.

Regarding the partners, Architectural Emporium (AE) is a Liverpool based practice specialising in community-rooted projects. AE has been working with KMBC since 2018, helping to develop and deliver a high street, and actively bridged the connection between the studio team, UFSS researchers and KMBC. The council embraced the opportunity to engage with the student cohort, which was usually a hard-to-reach demographic in Huyton, and recognised the value of crowdsourcing design ideas to explore possibilities for regeneration. Furthermore, UFSS has been developing tools to understand urban challenges and improve public space through design and planning. For them, this project offered a channel for knowledge exchange and community impact.

The project echoes Studio Pen & Inc's ongoing theme Liveable Cities and Fragile Futures, which addressed challenges of urban places and helps communities to connect and thrive. In particular, the theme promotes a balance between social, environmental and economic factors of sustainability to create healthy and happy places to live and love. The studio teaching is delivered as one compulsory design module each semester which follows the design cycles of the academic year at LSA. Within the module framework, the studio lead can define design briefs and decide on teaching operation autonomously, which enables external and internal collaborations to be conceived and developed.

The collaboration tests the impact of each party and their interactions on students' outcomes, and trials a methodology of teaching and research on studio learning to enrich the pedagogy of architectural education. To help with the reflection, a series of questions were asked to individual project partners at the end to get their feedback on the design process and outcomes, and what worked and what did not. Students' voices were also collected through a survey tool to understand their experience and learning outcomes.

The collaboration started with ideas of working with *live clients*, research-led teaching, the context of high streets, and the importance of knowledge exchange and real-world impact in architecture.<sup>1</sup> More discussions on these points are included in the reflection and conclusion sections. Our take on



Figure 1: Site model of the village centre surrounded by views through Derby Road (Zoe Huang 2021).

*beginning architecture* was that the students, for the first time, engaged with the real world after coming out of remote learning during COVID-19 isolation. The first *live project* opportunity in their undergraduate study exposed them to pressing issues including heritage revitalisation, community identity, climate change, and multi-stakeholders’ interests. It was a critical step in students’ architectural journey before they embark on their career afterwards or enter the next stage of learning.

### Huyton Village and high street challenge

Huyton is a town in the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley, Merseyside, England and is part of Liverpool’s urban area. Historically in Lancashire, Huyton was an ancient parish which contained Croxteth Park, Knowsley and Tarbock, and the township of Huyton-with-Roby in the mid-19th century.

Until the 1960s Huyton’s Derby Road was the civic, economic and social spine of its community (Fig.1). Along its length, between the train station and the parish church were its council offices, post office, its cinema and essential shops. The Village Centre is surrounded by extensive and relatively dense housing and benefits from convenient railway links to and from both Manchester and Liverpool. In the 1960s the cinema was closed, the council offices relocated to an adjacent site and the road was pedestrianised with a hopeful and aspirational new outlook governed and led by its proactive

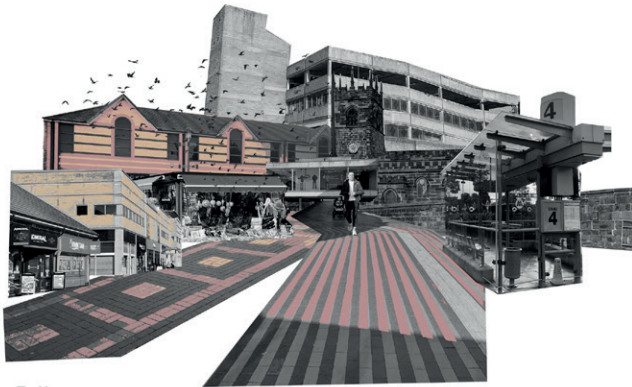
council and Member of Parliament, later revolutionary Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Harold Wilson.

In more recent years the Village Centre has suffered a slow decline in its physical quality and functional diversity. Building assets which date to the 1950s-80s are arguably not fit for new purposes and some basic public facilities are lacking, e.g. public toilets. The management of this high street has been complex due to its various land ownership, tenure, uses and conditions of historic assets. Now the only major employer in the Village Centre is the council itself. Whilst this provides daytime footfall it cannot sustain a 24-hour economy. KMBC have been focussing on proposals for Huyton Village which include plans to deliver an extensive seven-acre site of mixed-use development directly adjacent to the high street in the coming years. Despite this investment, it is important to ensure Derby Road, the high street, remains relevant not only for economic reasons, but also for social purposes as a public space at the heart of the town.

Indeed, the Grimsey Review pointed out that the UK's high street has been declining since the last decade and their survival can no longer depend on retail.<sup>2</sup> The situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. High streets (including Huyton Village) are facing huge challenges, with the current economic downturn brought by political conflicts and instability internationally, as well as the climate crisis. Some shared challenges identified in literature include:

- The changed perception of high street being the natural community centre. As personal mobility is enhanced, people have much more choice over where and when they shop.
- The COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the growth of online shopping which diluted people's need to visit shops in person.
- Dramatic demographic changes can be observed in many places, ranging from ageing populations, labour mobility across the globe, and migration due to political and economic crises in some parts of the world. Those social groups demand a change of services offered on high street.
- The increasing cost of retail rental spaces, which compromises their affordability for small independent businesses.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the above, as a small town, Huyton is disadvantaged in terms of economic competitiveness in the region and nationally, because it is located between two prosperous northern cities, Liverpool and Manchester. Its population features the largest group of young people in Knowsley but there are limited services for them on the high street. The town is facing problems of crimes, health inequality and income disparity among neighbouring communities.



Welcome To Huyton  
Genius Loci image of Huyton



Figure 2:  
Genius Loci collage which led to the  
manifesto, left (Emma Smith 2021).

Figure 3:  
Genius Loci collage, right  
(Samantha Evans 2021).

In recent years, we have seen increased political attention on high streets and town centres nationally via targeted policies, the establishment of an independent body — the High Streets Task Force, and funding streams such as the Levelling Up Fund.<sup>4</sup> However, Huyton has been unsuccessful in the recent two rounds of funding bids. Its struggle has been neglected by the central government. Indeed, in academic research and professional practice, attention often focused on big cities such as London and Glasgow. Nevertheless, although the aforementioned literature stresses the experience economy and multifunctionality of high streets in the post-pandemic era, how to make the transition locally needs bespoke interventions, strong leadership, careful coordination and broad collaboration.<sup>5</sup> The place value and distinctive heritage need to be celebrated in order to restore high street's role as the socio-economic backbone of the town.

### The project structure

The studio project was to provide much-needed functions and services for the local community and to support KMBC's work on reprogramming underused and vacant buildings and spaces to bring life back to the Village Centre. Two design cycles were undertaken over two semesters of the academic year. The first asked students to propose a strategic micro-plan and a manifesto for the high street and the design of a *meanwhile use* (Fig.2 & 3). The second was to design a permanent community hub on a key high street site through either adaptive reuse of existing buildings or a new-build.

Design briefs were shaped from detailed conversations among the collaborators. Brief One was deliberately open-ended to enable blue-sky thinking and critical discovery by students who were encouraged to be open-minded and not limited by any thinking or belief that may constrain their creativity.<sup>6</sup> Brief Two reflected on the outcomes of the first cycle to determine sites on the high street and programmes of design in the second cycle. It was more prescriptive and complex, yet enabled students to incorporate their own manifestos and concepts.

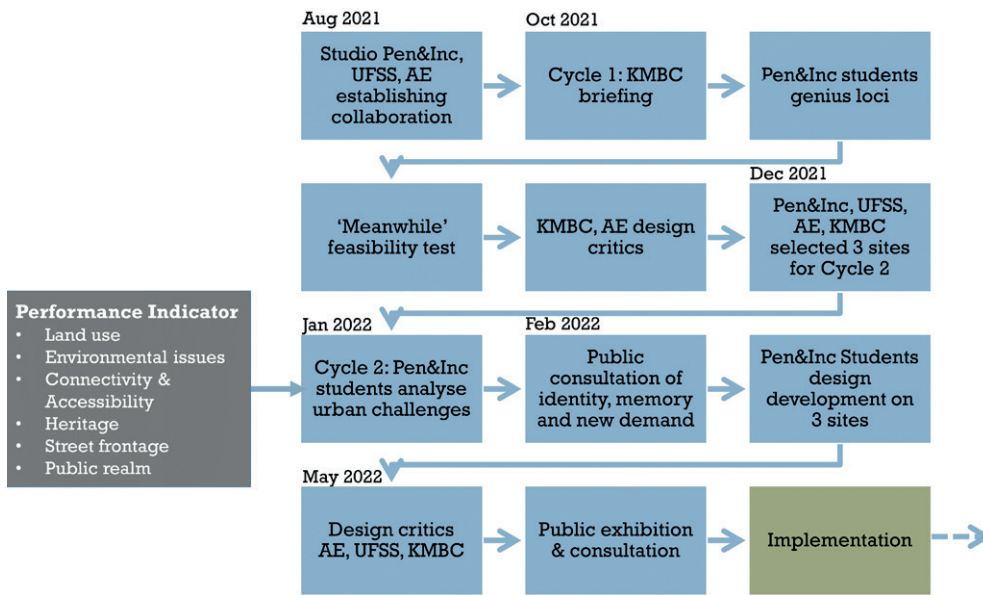


Figure 4: Project stages and partners' inputs, (Sandy Britton, Fei Chen and Luke Cooper 2022).

At the beginning, KMBC shared their master plan visions and aspirations with the students and collaborators. AE shared core building surveys and drawings with the students. Students supplemented these with their own research, site surveys and observations. UFSS and the teaching team suggested essential readings on high streets and regeneration to the students. This pooling of resources proved to be effective in allowing the project to develop smoothly within the restricted time frame of the modules.

The stages of progression and partners' input across the project can be seen in Fig.4; in particular, three distinct sessions with stakeholders were carried out (Fig.5). Each tested a format of collaboration and encompassed specific targets:

1. During Cycle 1, an in-situ round table presentation/discussion/feedback session with project partners to review Cycle 1 visioning and Meanwhile proposals, which led to the development of Cycle 2 brief;
2. At the beginning of Cycle 2, a social media Community Survey focusing on heritage value, place memory and identity to feed into Cycle 2 proposals;
3. At the end of Cycle 2, an on-site exhibition of design proposals and ideas for local communities to disseminate ideas and invite feedback and input from the communities.

In addition, four design critiques took place across the academic year with input from the project partners, specialist guests and other stakeholders. Learning activities were additionally supported through invited specialist lectures and building tours (Fig.6).



Figure 5:  
 Top left: Collaborators' discussion with the students; bottom/middle left students working on site; onsite exhibition; and top/bottom right, community engagement (Sandy Britton, Fei Chen and Luke Cooper 2022).

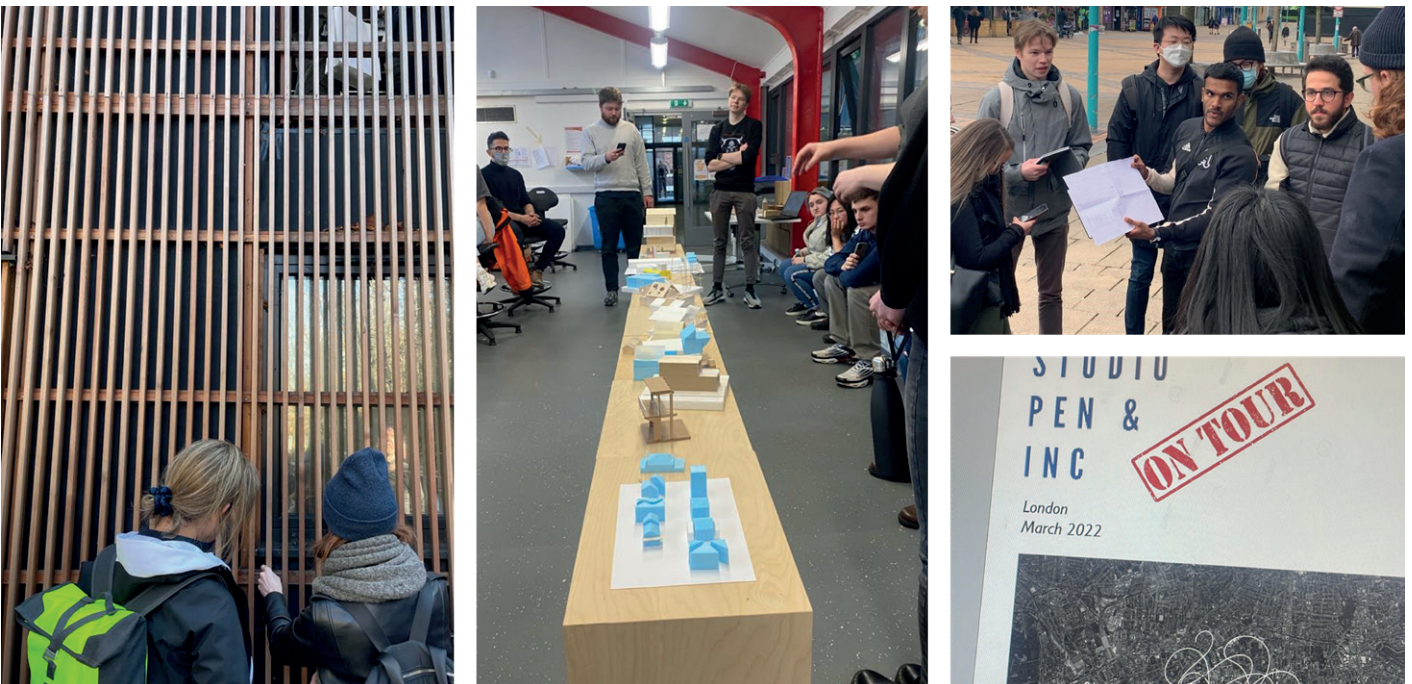


Figure 6:  
 Left, students on site; middle students' conceptual models; and right, students site surveying and our (Sandy Britton, Fei Chen and Luke Cooper 2022).

## The briefs

In Brief One, the Meanwhile proposal aimed to provide a temporary solution to a current challenge, an activator to test a specific need, or a generator for a specific activity. In this proposal, the students were encouraged to consider: where the proposal is located on the high street, what it is, who would use it, and how long it would be there. Achieving low cost and high impact was particularly emphasised in tutorials by showing various relevant precedents and exemplar solutions. Students were encouraged to reuse materials, source local materials and select modular or off-the-shelf components.

Regarding pedagogy, the Meanwhile project was a rich learning opportunity for addressing interlinked aspects of economy and community, for *seeing* opportunities and values in vacant or underused sites, as well as for testing effective and sustainable construction methods for temporary installations. It was also a mechanism to rapidly engage KMBC and wider stakeholder groups for feedback and advice to shape subsequent projects. It gave students a sense of working in a real-world situation with the client's agenda and interests to consider.

Brief Two shifted to permanent solutions for the high street, and community hubs with a Council interface were suggested by the teaching team with collaborators to bring a much-needed critical mass to the high street. Three sites were chosen, and each offered significant heritage with the community identity and collective memory and a unique pedagogical opportunity. Setting parallel briefs on multiple sites enabled concurrent testing by students and ultimately provided three sets of visioning for conversation and debates across the length of the high street.

Students were asked to choose one of the three designated sites with associated programmes:

- Sherbourne Square: Housing based community hub through adaptive reuse;
- Mayfair Cinema: Arts and Culture based community hub through adaptive reuse; or
- William Hill: Health and Wellbeing based community hub through a new-build gateway.

The Sherbourne Square and Mayfair Cinema sites offered opportunities for students to engage with retrofitting and repurposing, as well as the respective tangible and intangible heritage of each site. Sherbourne Square is a late 1960s mixed use, concrete-framed development, previously signifying progressive architectural and social development of the town. Despite being in disrepair, it is now in private ownership and the ground floor is currently occupied by small independent businesses.



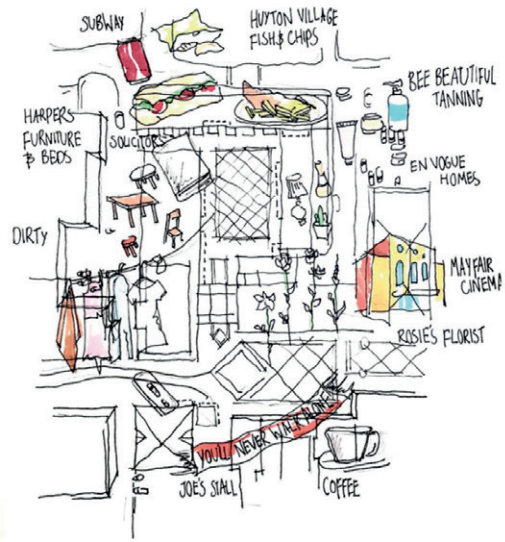


Figure 7: Urban analysis (Amira Al-Najjar 2022).



Figure 8: Urban analysis (Patrick Allen 2022).

The Mayfair Cinema was a brick building dated to the 1930s. This 1300-seat cinema, with its original art deco remnants that are visible internally, sits in the middle of the high street adjacent to Sherbourne Square and had been more recently divided and occupied by a national chemist chain. Now empty, it is seen by the council as a key regeneration site, and is still warmly regarded by the local community.

The William Hill site by contrast was offered to students as a clearance site to explore the possibilities of a new-build on this gateway location to address the arrivals of visitors at the high street by rail.

Students carried out surveys and heritage assessments of the existing buildings and created proposals using their Cycle 1 manifestos. They continued to discuss their aspirations with KMBC to make sure their proposals were relevant. Student's urban research methodologies were developed and guided by UFSS, and fed into their design development. The urban analysis focused on environmental and social sustainability (e.g. existing infrastructure and site microclimate); permeability of the high street and its vicinity; land use and programme; identity and heritage; active street frontage; and public realm, which were identified as the most relevant to Derby Road by UFSS with the collaborators (Fig.7 & 8). These factors also acted as key performance indicators providing a common language for all parties to assess proposals.

The move from Meanwhile to permanent proposals perfectly accorded with a live regeneration scenario and the progressive demands of the two consecutive final year design modules in the Liverpool School of Architecture's Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Architecture Programme that is Part One accredited by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

## Outcomes

For Cycle 1, students used demountable structures and components, such as shipping containers, flatpack timbers, scaffolding and tents, in their proposals, which ranged from play spaces, pavilions, community meeting points, markets, cycling facilities and a power generation station (Fig.9, 10, 11 & 12). AE commented that:

The Meanwhile proposals were the most satisfying in terms of the variety and diversity of the students' ideas which had not previously been considered by the council or the architectural practice.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the council were extremely impressed with some of the outcomes, which were recognised as genuinely achievable. The Lively Sail as a community market/event space was then implemented during summer 2022 (Fig.13). A feasibility study was undergoing for another project titled People's Pod with the possibility of future implementation (Fig.14).

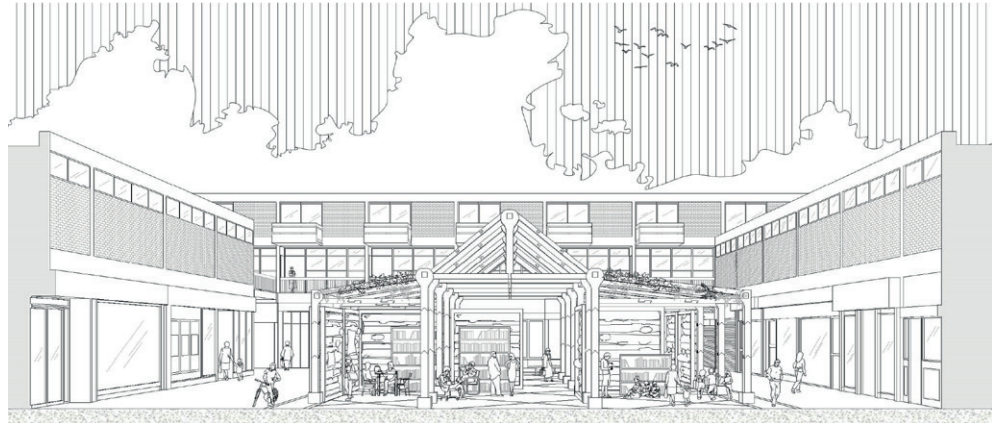


Figure 9:  
Meanwhile proposals: library  
(Amira Al-Najjar 2021).



Figure 10:  
Bicycle and environmental  
information station  
(Samantha Evans 2021).



Figure 11:  
Pop-up WC and Charging Station  
(Xhesika Bicaku 2021).



Figure 12:  
Pop-up Cinema (Zoe Huang 2021).

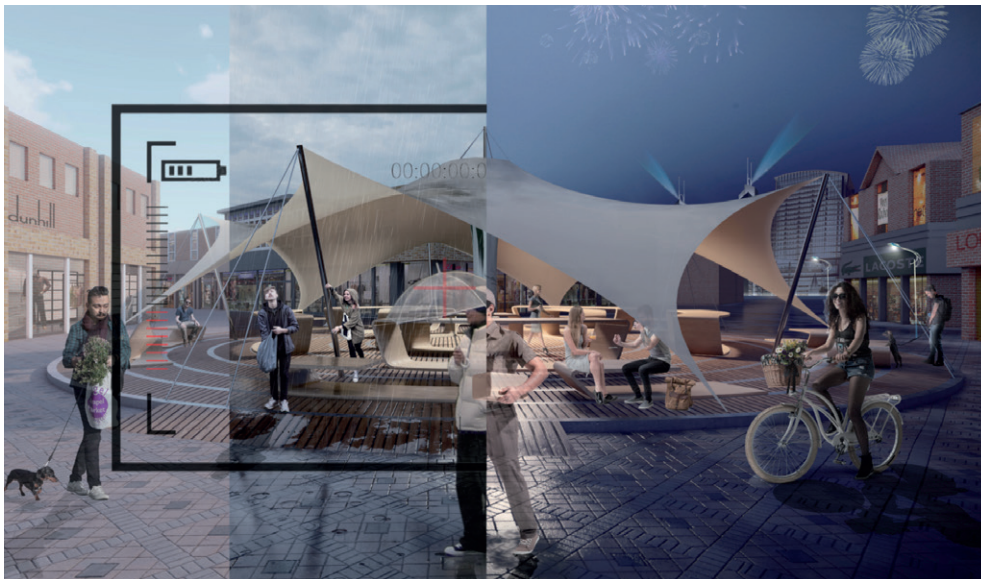


Figure 13:  
Lively Sail (Yiquan Tang 2021).



Figure 14:  
Peoples' Pod  
(Charlotte Bailey 2021).



Figure 15:  
Sherbourne Square, ReGeneration  
Housing (Emma Smith 2022).

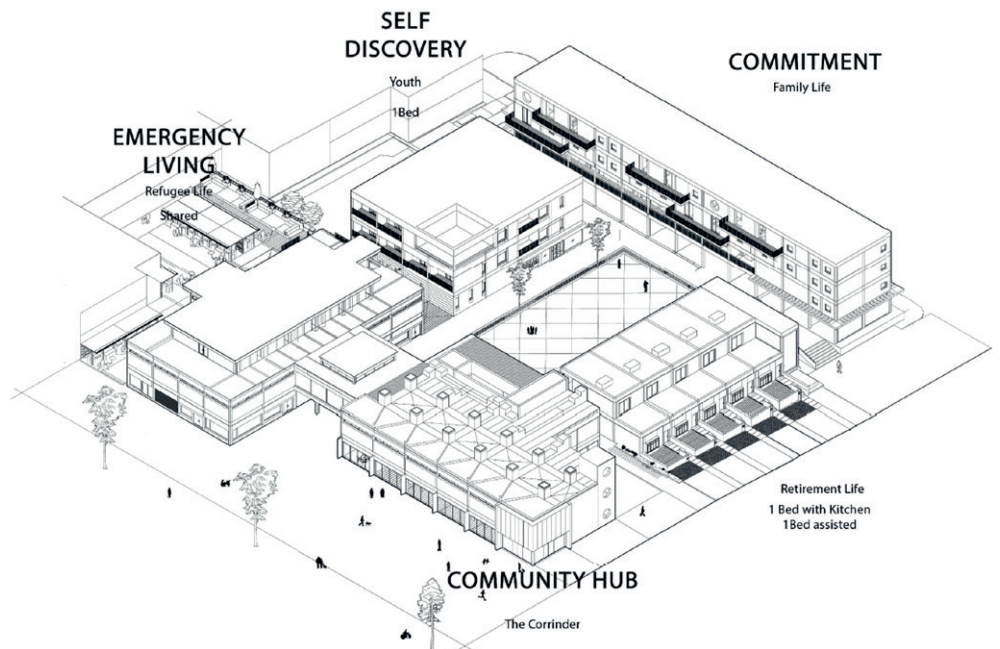


Figure 16:  
Mixed urban community hub  
(Amer Balan 2022).

For Cycle 2, successful proposals showed sophisticated thinking on safe patterns of access by foot, cycling or public transports; permeability and connectivity to the high street and to adjacent areas; threshold and transition between public/semi-public/private spaces that permitted flexibility and fluidity.

On the Sherbourne Square site, all projects maintained the essential rhythm and framed-stacked block form of the existing buildings. The students endeavoured to clear later additions to the rear and to open up a route to and around the site. They were encouraged to consider fabric insulation upgrading, weatherproofing and maximising orientation opportunities with balconies, greening and sun rooms. A range of diverse proposals were developed including live/work dwellings maintaining shop front at the ground level with accommodations above (Fig.15 & 16); housing for people over the age of 55 and assisted living (Extra Care); emergency housing as a place of hospitality welcoming short, medium and long term stays. The community and council hub would provide essential support infrastructure and amenities, such as shared rooftop gardens for growing, shared sewing machines, small workshops,

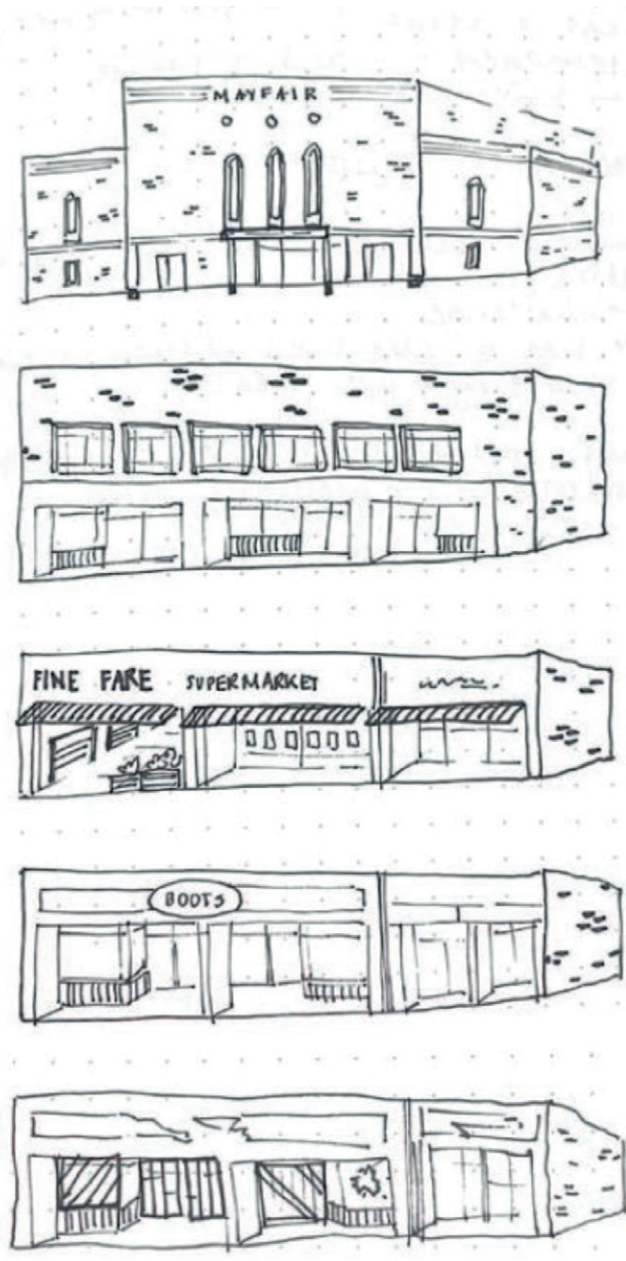
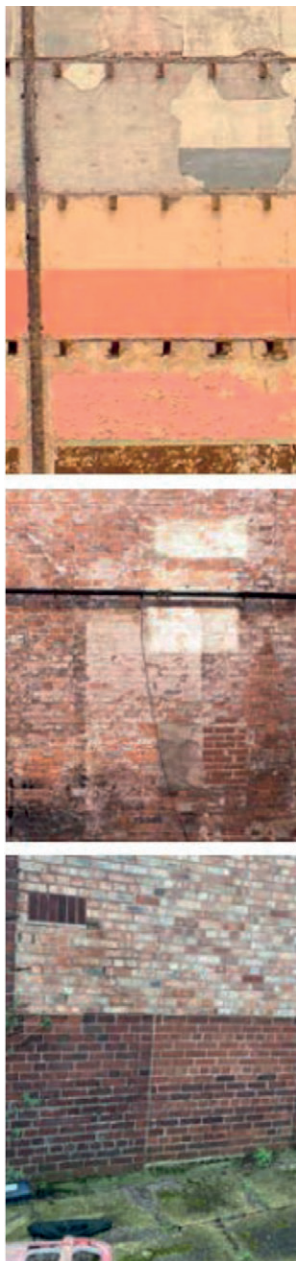


Figure 17:  
Exposed brickwork as historical  
layers (Charlotte Bebb 2022).

clothes swap stations, as well as providing self-run skill-building opportunities for residents.

Regarding the Mayfair Cinema site, challenges included the retention and expression of the original plaster ceiling formerly spanning the auditorium, and issues of insulation and preserving integrity of heritage. Some students wrapped the exterior in an insulation skin whilst peeling back to leave interior walls exposed to show original plaster and brickwork. Some others adopted the opposite strategy, leaving expressive layers of original brickwork externally shown (Fig.17, 18 & 19). Successful project proposals created dual active frontages of the building; re-imagined the current rear parking space and created accessible garden and green space; enabled street façade engagement through flexible uses including evening events and festivals; created clear and efficient internal circulation systems; addressed the need to maximise the potential for sound



Figure 18:  
Exposed internal features  
(Patrick Alan 2022).

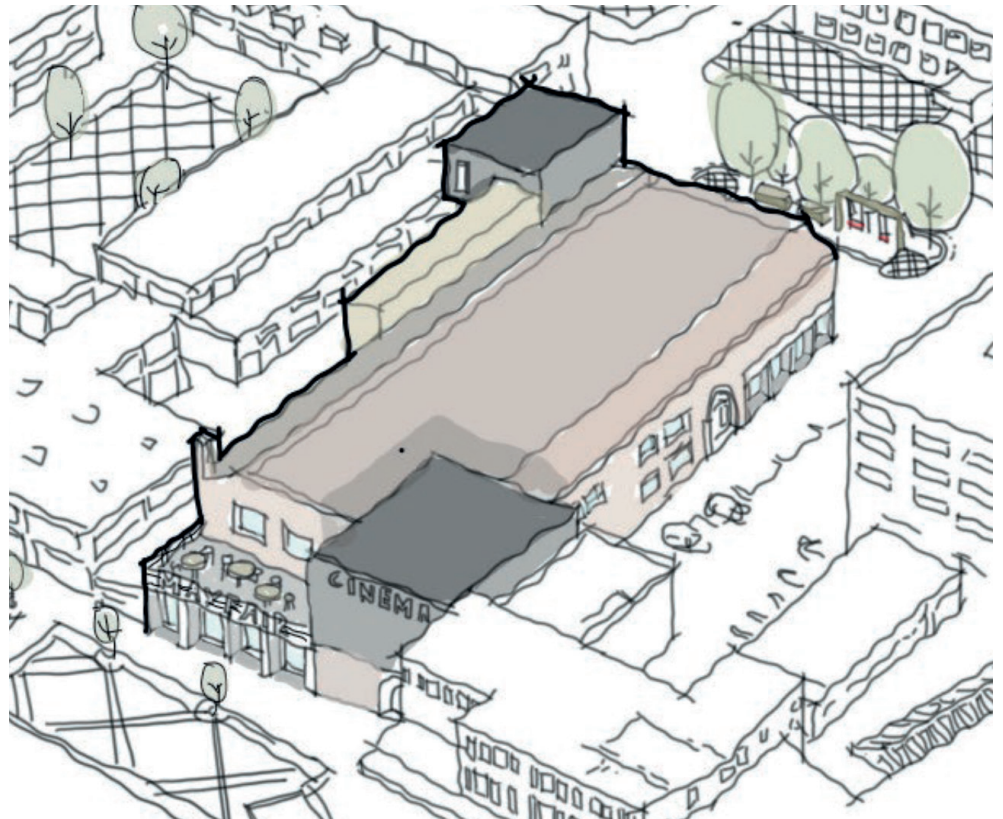


Figure 19:  
Mayfair in context  
(Amira Al-Najjar 2022).



Figure 20:  
Cultural centre and council hub  
(Qifeng Hou 2022).

buffering whilst allowing natural light and flow of air into the existing deep plan (Fig.20 & 21).

On the William Hill site, student proposals addressed the corner aspect and gateway nature of this site – maximising views from the train station and Derby Road using height, active frontages and colour. For example, one project explored the use of cantilevers and large windows from which activities were very visible as real time advertisements for the facilities inside. The project focussed on developing the aspirations of young people, in particular, to see what they can





Figure 21:  
Mayfair Site, ALCOVExEVO  
(Donny Dailyda 2022).

be and do. The concept of health was manifested in a variety of provisions or activities. Naturally lit, ventilated and generous spaces were created from sustainably sourced materials (Fig.22).

#### Feedback and reflection

To help analyse the collaboration effects of the project, a series of questions were asked of all collaborators: KMBC, AE, UFSS, and the studio teaching staff and students at the end of the academic year. Questions included how the process influenced each group's work, what was successful and what they would do differently next time to improve.

Students celebrated the exposure to integrated *layers of learning*. This included the opportunity to develop an understanding of respective interests of the architectural practice, researchers, the council and the community. It also allowed them to develop design responses to balance the politic-economic pressure and heritage values. They could demonstrate development opportunities in underused sites and test environmentally-friendly construction methods. They could interpret abstract urban design concepts to inform contextually-sensitive solutions. Throughout the process students rapidly moved across and between cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning.<sup>8</sup> Students were able to witness those social and environmental factors affecting high street regeneration, the economic complexities and the policy mechanisms that were used to drive change. A student said that:

[...] KMBC gave us students an insight of the real working world. Dealing with *clients* of the high street along-side different ideas they were throwing at us has been challenging too. However, their influence has helped us shape and form different design ideas in the real-world context. The meetings with the council help[ed] set and identify design aspirations and the regular contact helped to overview our progress.<sup>9</sup>

AE noted how the process enabled the showcasing of *what is possible* on the high street to the council which cannot be achieved by a practice with limited budget in their commission. Projects that were unconstrained by fees and



Figure 22:  
William Hill site, 'Healthy Building'  
(Samantha Evans 2022).

construction budgets helped to *free up* the council's vision for the Village Centre to consider alternative approaches. AE suggested that the brief should encourage even more radical/challenging proposals in the future. Regarding working with UFSS, AE stressed the importance of making sure that the project remains relevant in today's environment through cutting edge research, writing:

When we envisaged the project, we set out to attempt to address some of the issues of a failing high street. Since then we have been through a global pandemic and we are now in a cost of living crisis. It is vital that the research/academic team remain involved to make sure we address how these issues continue to affect the high street.<sup>10</sup>

KMBC commented on how their public consultations on the Huyton regeneration programme struggled to engage with young people and that the collaboration with LSA enabled this key age group to be involved in the development of the Village Centre. At the end, KMBC are committed to recreate two of the Meanwhile proposals on Derby Road (see Fig. 6). In future collaboration they would encourage a greater presence of students on the high street by providing a shop unit as the base for the Pen & Inc Studio and facilitate the studio's engagement with their development partners for the new site. The Council responded that they are:

[...] keen to create a vibrant town centre. The work alongside LSA has been thought provoking and has challenged our regeneration plans [...] particularly around Meanwhile uses on the high street [...] The relationship with the LSA is strong and the Council is keen to further develop those relationships.<sup>11</sup>

UFSS felt rewarded to have generated real-world impact via their research. The process itself was a research opportunity for them to observe and understand the specific challenges and actions of high street regeneration in Huyton and how it may be related to relevant theory and wider contexts nationally and internationally. They enjoyed the teaching element to guide students to produce meaningful urban analysis for design. UFSS commented that more effective community engagement would have been useful and should be pursued in the future.

The studio staff praised the process for being impactful and offered a rich methodology for teaching. The success of this pedagogy is the knowledge exchange which has taken place and was generously supported by all parties who were all willing to trial an untested approach with aligned aims. This positive spirit was both welcomed and demanded following a period of enforced pandemic-related isolation. For LSA, it was a success to witness that the endeavours of students were welcomed and valued by the council and community, and that the theoretical concepts of urban design were manifested in critical design proposals.

As noted, while the strength of the project was the partnership with goodwill, optimism, flexibility, shared interests in outcomes, and a fair degree of trust and autonomy, it also encountered many challenges. For example, limited funding restricted the opportunity to create engagement and knowledge exchange activities. Rapid involvement of the project left no time to obtain ethical approval which would have facilitated broader community reach otherwise. The academic calendar and module requirements governed the structure of the project and limited the involvement of student design decisions. Further challenges included navigating the complexities of collaborative decision making and being able to dedicate the time required to this. Student presence on the high street was limited due to distance from University. A high street work base would have increased efficiency, immersion and partner engagement. To work effectively with the existing buildings students were required to be taught and carry out shared measured surveys which, whilst undoubtedly valuable learning, was additional to usual activities rewarded in module structure and disproportionately time consuming in the time frame of the project. These challenging aspects need to be considered by others who may want to pursue a similar collaborative approach in teaching.

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

The collaborative live studio provided students with a valuable opportunity in the first stage of their architectural education, at the threshold of their professional lives, to experience the multi-faceted nature of high street regeneration. This inquiry immersed the students with a host of timely pressing issues of national importance, including heritage revitalisation, community identity-building, climate actions and high streets' vitality (short-term), adaptability (medium-term) and resilience (long-term).<sup>12</sup> It reflected the High Street Task Force's call to bring young people to the high street and Grimsey Reports' emphasis on localism, leadership and sustainability, as well as the Institute of Place Management's COVID-19 Recovery Framework.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding pedagogy, being exposed to the multiple *layers of learning* as explained before helped students to build personal confidence, knowledge and understanding of the complexity of the built environment, particularly as they emerged from COVID isolations. Based on their feedback, the students initially had strong discomfort for face-to-face communication of their work and ideas with peers, tutors, clients and the wide audience. The engagement with project partners alongside purposefully encouraging tutorials delivered by the teaching team have grown their confidence in communication and critical thinking through alternative solutions. The students felt they were valued.

In confirmation of Jan Kattein's argument, this live project enhanced the students' listening and negotiation skills in addition to graphic communications and presentation. All of them are vitally important for their employability. The engagement in dialogue, collaboration and teamwork

with multiple stakeholders, including the community, shifted the students' understanding of the role of the architect from the lone genius to community empowerment, which is fundamental for their career development in the future. Moreover, this project reinforced professionalism and accountability in the studio and underpinned its academic relevance in the real world.<sup>14</sup> As stated by Harriet Harris, live projects help students to actively manage risks and tolerate ambiguity. However, as the project evolved, stakeholders' inputs were not always possible to envisage.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the project advocated the retrofitting of the building, which was recently identified as a teaching gap in architectural education.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to the role of project partners, each party has been impactful. Without KMBC's responsiveness and power to enable, the project would have been much less rooted in the real world and be less likely to influence the future high street. AE's knowledge of the site, generosity of resources and eagerness to think outside of the box were key to the success of the collaboration. UFSS' research-led approach helped all parties to communicate through an identified urban design language and to gather and analyse information systematically. The research support to the studio is recognised by the studio team as a good practice in a research-led institution. The LSA teaching team provided critical guidance, support and interpretation of information for students to produce critical design solutions. The students themselves as emerging thinkers and architects have given the project life and visions. The collaboration has helped underpin the studio ethos of Liveable Cities and Fragile Futures and has enriched its live project teaching pedagogy.

This project has tested the impact of collaboration in architectural education. It curates the idea of architecture as a social enterprise. On the one hand, the interconnected nature and mutual benefit of the multiple-collaborator scenario has facilitated a rich and productive delivery of teaching. On the other hand, the ability to channel the students' endeavours and associated academic research on the impacts the live project has been a considerable achievement.

While acknowledging the limitations and challenges of the project as mentioned above, we believe this is a valuable teaching model, one which we hope to pursue and develop through further funding capture, extended community engagement, even wider stakeholder collaboration and a more flexible programme. According to a participating student:

[...] Working towards a better environment for all is what every architect/student should aim for and I thought the proposals worked really well. The project has introduced to me a bigger context, that of a town and how everyone interacts with it and how much of an effect architecture has on people individually.<sup>17</sup>

### *Acknowledgements*

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