

Participatory Approach: Students as the Leaders

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Abstract

This paper outlines the development of a participatory approach in the education of architecture students applying to various perspectives of community architecture and planning, providing a real-life learning environment not only for students to work together, but also to collaborate with the community on community-oriented issues. This is a significant shift in the paradigm of the professional education and practice, and will have much to offer and explore for future teaching and learning as much as the social significance and professionals in the HKSAR.

Some community participatory projects with ideas originated from architecture students are reported in this paper. The students act as facilitators throughout the participatory process leading the community, primary and secondary school students to collaborate, create, and develop their learning/proposals based on 'real-life' projects. The teaching pedagogy aims to encourage critical evaluation, analysis and synthesis in solving problems in the real-life project context. It also provides the students an environment to integrate knowledge gained in the different subject disciplines – not only from planning to architecture and engineering, but also embracing the important aspects in urban sociology, politics, economics, public administration, etc in the pluralistic society context in the HKSAR.

Keywords: participation, collaboration, community-oriented

Participatory Approach

The need for provision of participatory professional services of architects, planners, urban designers and engineers is now much stronger than before. The widespread controversies over the harbour reclamation, urban renewal and heritage conservation truly pointed out that in the advancement process of the professions, public participation should be one of the key components to direct the creation of a collaborating methodology and framework for community architecture, urban construction and development. This is to make sure the needs and aspiration of the public are to be duly considered.

In the Hong Kong context, public participation in the planning and design process of the living environment is not yet easy and widely promoted and explored. Traditionally, authorities, who own the resources for initiating public consultation or participation, are of the view that soliciting public views is ineffective and inefficient. Professionals such as architects, planners, urban designers and engineers are considered having the qualification, capabilities and knowledge to create a high-quality and high-standard living and working places for people. Nevertheless, without going through a participatory and mutual-understanding process, the “public needs and aspirations” were not easily grasped and reflected accordingly in the development plans and designs prepared by professionals. Architect as one of the leading members in shaping the built environment of our future city cannot avoid the responsibilities to deliver a participatory process especially due to the fact that the conflicts resulted from the recent incidents are emerging acute.

Architecture school in university is where the architects-to-be acquire knowledge and well equip themselves for professional practice in real life particularly on the role of the architect working in relationship with others and architect’s position in and responsibilities towards society. The education of architecture students needs closely responding to the new challenges which the architectural profession is facing - the participatory process. One of the best ways to help the students to understand the issue and its importance is to get them involved and lead in the participatory process.

Such participatory approach in the education of architecture aims to inspire students from multi-disciplines and members of the public, including community representatives from various sectors, to take a closer look at the people, processes, technology and materials that built up the community environment in Hong Kong. In the participatory process, students have to reveal the existing conditions of the community environment and its problems, and identify the needs of the community arisen out of the changes in demographic patterns, complex issue in socio-economic development and unique urbanization issues, for example. The students act as the leader and facilitator who also voice out specific local concern in a district and explore and develop means of “participatory approach” for the respective communities and themselves participate actively and actually take part in critical thinking and problem solving.

The teaching pedagogy intends to encourage critical evaluation, analysis and synthesis in solving problems in the real-life project context. It also provides the students an environment to integrate knowledge gained in the different subject disciplines – not only from planning to architecture and engineering, but also embracing the important aspects in urban sociology, politics, economics, public administration, etc. It promotes the students’ understanding of their specific disciplines and interdisciplinary nature of the development and design process – most importantly, with the community. Moreover, students, professionals and the community develop team working.

Participatory Projects

Architecture students formed groups of six to eight persons to identify topics of local significance in a district, which as Architects would find important to obtain community’s views for architectural / urban design intervention. Each group was required to propose a participatory group activity in a local community to involve their participation. Output of each

group included presentation and submission of report using diagrams, photos, and sketches with notes.

Throughout the participatory process in various forms, including workshops, exhibitions and competitions etc., the general public were provided opportunities to understand the major issues and considerations related to their living environment and to express their views. The findings of the projects were documented in respective reports and submitted to the concerned authorities to consider and pursue any follow-up actions with involvement of the concerned residents to enable a continual participatory process.

These participatory projects were intended to explore and develop a “participatory approach” in the education of architecture students applied to various perspectives of community architecture and urban planning, providing a real-life learning environment not only for students to work together, document the processes and experience for wider dissemination and public exhibition but also to collaborate with the community on community-oriented issues.

Group A) Made in Wan Chai – Making Wan Chai

Students’ intention and statement

The objective is to provide opportunities for the local residents in Wan Chai district to participate in the urban regeneration process. Through conducting interviews and exhibition, students investigated and recorded the residents’ collective memories and opinions on regeneration with particular respect to the market area in the district including the on-street markets along Tai Yuen Street / Cross Street as well as the indoor market, Wan Chai Market, which was to be demolished. All the public comments were disseminated to the concerned authorities, including the Urban Renewal Authority, Hong Kong District Planning Office, Wan Chai District Office and Wan Chai District Council, to pursue their follow-up work with the local public.

Methodology

Students adopted a documentary approach. With aids of photos, videos and text, students recorded the local characters, collective memories, on-street interviews and the significance of the market area towards the local residents. Market activities at Cross Street and Wan Chai Road were recorded at every 0.5 hour. Participatory public exhibition with panels and games was held for residents to express their opinions on the redevelopment of Wan Chai.



Group B) “Future Urban Design and Living” Workshop

Students’ intention and statement

Planning and urban development should not be determined solely by the government and professionals. The public should pay an important and significant role. Although the government and professionals may have prepared well-developed plans, it does not mean that such will perfectly meet the public needs and aspirations. The end users can reflect what they want and how they feel about the built environment.

The former Kai Tak Airport area in Kowloon City is a prominent site with mega scale developments which affect thousands of people and economy of Hong Kong. A participatory planning process should be promoted and developed in shaping the future of this precious land and our city. This project aimed at arousing public awareness and providing information for the redevelopment of the concerned area. It also provided an opportunity for the participants to design the local community with their own ideas and expectations.



Methodology

3 design workshops were held for primary and secondary schools. Participated students were divided into groups. A particular piece of land of the airport area was assigned to each group. Each group was required to design the land use and environment on that piece of land by the use of physical model. At the end, all models were combined together forming the entire possible future development of the old airport area.

Group C) Footbridge Beautification

Students’ intention and statement

In a crowded place like Hong Kong, footbridges mainly function for road-crossing. Nevertheless, footbridges can provide spectacular amount of enjoyment to users if they are nicely and delightfully designed and decorated. However, this is not yet the case in Hong Kong. Most of the footbridges are standing dully on their own. Though they function well, but provide little visionary enjoyment. In fact, a footbridge can be decorated to provide valuable



experience for people both walking through it and looking at it from far away. A public exhibition was organized to let the local public to express their opinions on the beautification and design of footbridges in Hong Kong. Comments of the public collected were disseminated to the concerned authorities.

Methodology

With panels and models, the public were introduced the students' proposed designs and the problems of design and beautification measures of footbridges in Hong Kong and invited to express their ideas by texts and drawings.



Group D) Participatory Approach to Park Design

Students' intention and statement

A piece of land near Ning Fung Court in Kwai Chung was originally proposed for park development. But, the Government has recently changed the land use to a car park. This has aroused adverse comments and objection from the local residents and a signature movement has been launched to express their needs and aspirations for a park there. A series of participatory activities were organized to collect the valuable comments from the local residents. These comments were disseminated to the concerned authorities to pursue their follow-up works with the local residents.



Methodology

The participatory project consisted of student design/drawing competition for the park, interviews with local residents and District Councilor and public exhibition. Via in-depth discussion with residents, students collected public views and background understanding of the incidence. With aids of exhibition panels, the local public were introduced the background of the issues/problems and invited to express their further comments by texts and drawings.



Group E) Re-visualization @ Ngau Pang

Students' intention and statement

Former Cattle Depot (Ngau Pang) in Ma Tau Kok is a place of memory and identity in the district. Being a place for slaughter in the past, it has not been a welcoming spot among the neighbourhood. Since the use for slaughter was abandoned, it is now used by artists as a place for exhibition and art creation. This change of use may have aroused interests in the neighbourhoods. The objectives of this participatory project aimed to arouse awareness of art and architecture in the neighborhood, provide students / youngsters an introduction to design / architecture and promote the artwork exhibition.

Methodology

The participatory project adopted a design charrette and competition format for primary school students. Participants were divided into several groups to design the Cattle Depot site with their own creative ideas. The activities were held in the Cattle Depot site where participants walked around by themselves. The project was supported by an artist group who introduced artworks to the participants. Survey of local residents' views of the use and value of the Cattle Depot was also conducted by the students.



Group F) Noise Barrier Design Charrette

Students' intention and statement

The development of road system in Hong Kong is rapid in accordance to the development of our city. In this high density city, our living spaces are affected by the noise produced by the vehicles which run nearby. Therefore noise barriers are necessary to stop the noise affecting the living spaces. A Noise Barrier Design Charrette was organized which aimed at raising public awareness about such facilities.

Methodology

The participatory project included a design charrette and design competition. Participating senior secondary school students were divided into several groups to create innovative noise barrier designs at a selected site along the Tolo Highway. Programme included site visit, lecture, group design, presentation and plenary session.



The Learning Process

In these participatory projects, architecture students acted as leaders and facilitators, involved in the planning and decision-making in a series of carefully devised actions to solicit public and stakeholders' feedbacks, involvement and proposals. Students collaborated, created and developed their learning/proposals based on "real-life" projects – with the communities, professionals and primary/secondary school students and learnt to recognize the constraints and considerations in design/planning and in solving design problems, and weigh various design/planning issues.

In the process, through thorough understanding of the needs of the end-users and feedback of community representatives on the current/anticipated design of various important aspects of community architecture and planning, it is anticipated that the students and community will also understand more from the "process" and participate in shaping the outcomes.

From the activities organized, students and the respective communities participated actively and actually took part in critical thinking and problem solving. Interpersonal, communication, organization and ethical judgment skills are impregnated in the learning process.

Conclusion

These participatory projects were a first attempt to explore and develop the "participatory approach" in the education of architecture students applying to various perspectives of community architecture and urban planning which responds to the current challenges of the architectural profession. It provides a real-life learning environment not only for students to work together, but also to collaborate with the community. This is a significant shift in the paradigm of the profession education and practice, and will have much to offer and explore for future teaching and learning as much as the social significance and practice by the government and professionals in HKSAR.

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