

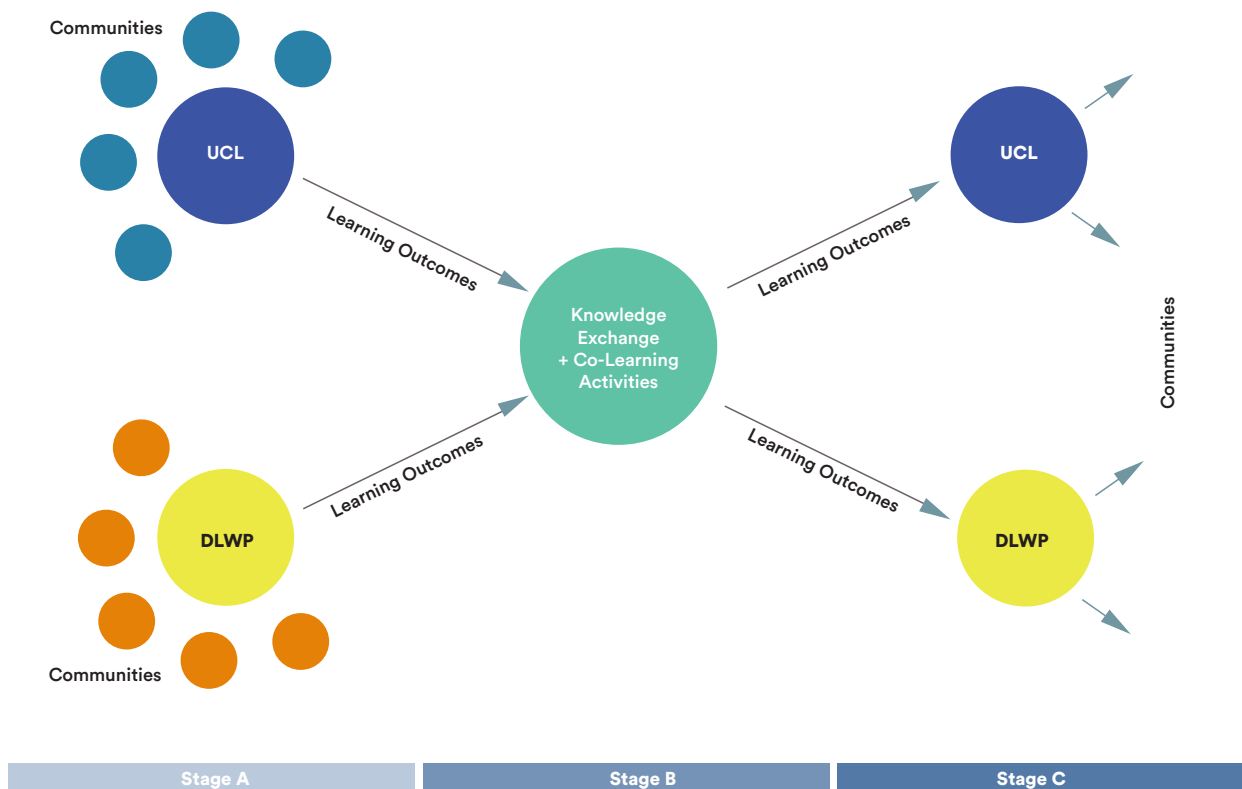
# Thinking Through Open Learning Spaces Knowledge Exchange Report

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## Summary

Thinking Through Open Learning Spaces was a half-day event comprised of talks, activities and discussions held in spaces throughout the De La Warr Pavilion (DLWP) in order to explore techniques and reflections on opening up spaces for different forms of learning. It was organised and facilitated through a collaborative partnership between DLWP and Bartlett School of Architecture (BSA) and open to an invited group of participants comprising local museum and gallery professionals, arts educators, artists and architects working with people to learn and benefit from the arts.

The talks by Kieran Mahon and David Roberts (BSA) with Amy Butt (University of Reading) and Fiona MacDonald (Chelsea College of Art), Rosie Cooper and Ashley McCormick (DLWP) summarised and shared outcomes from two community-focused projects led by the Bartlett (*Schools Without Walls*) and DLWP (*Thinking Through...*). These talks were followed by activities that invited participants to reflect on how different types of space constrain or enable learning and how we can open up the process of designing and manipulating space to people with different needs and priorities.



[Fig. 1]

Conceptual diagram of processes of knowledge exchange.

## **Talk 1: Schools Without Walls**

In the first talk, Mahon, Roberts, Butt and MacDonald introduced 'Schools Without Walls': a week-long, architectural archive-driven, live construction and performance project led which involved 30 Year Six students and their teachers at Orchard Primary School, Lambeth. Orchard School – now a Muslim faith school – was designed in the 1920s as an 'open air' school and is Grade II Listed.

Delivered in July 2019, the project aimed to widen participation in architectural education to groups who might not otherwise have access to it. As the value of art and design teaching and resources in many primary and secondary schools is increasingly being questioned, a key ambition was to assist the school to inspire young people in discovering this pathway.

It did this by introducing students to their school's radical architectural and pedagogical history and invited them to creatively interpret, build and perform their own versions of this history in a series of site-specific installations.

### **Knowledge Exchange**

The project delivery team – composed of educational professionals, architects and volunteers – consulted with the school's senior management team over several months to develop the brief in line with the community's learning needs and resources. Through these meetings the team learnt about the school's aspirations for diversifying its curriculum which informed the specific resources developed, and educational strategies the specific individuals within the year group would respond well to. The school also expressed a desire for the student work to reflect on the architecture of the school in a way that might be used to inform proposed future development of the school, and the desire for the project to allow students to build something which could stand as a legacy and record of their time at the school for the benefit of younger children.

During the project, students shared their own knowledge about the school's architecture with the team. Memories, explanations and understandings of how they had grown up in the

school and used its different spaces for different activities over time emerged through a process of facilitation which valued personal reflection and individual experience.

In turn, the project team shared knowledge about the school's historical context as well as a process of making with the school community. Students engaged reflectively with archival materials and were then guided through drawing, model-making and co-build activities to construct a series of pavilion structures.

### **Outcomes**

Our project methodology allowed for a range of learning abilities to actively engage with the activities that remained relevant to student experience. The iterative processes of reflection and making introduced the students to new skills that opened up ways of thinking about creative excellence and empowering them as young practitioners. A particularly successful instance of this was to observe young women of colour talking to us about wanting to pursue careers in architecture which they had not previously considered.

The project team approached the school not with a set of fixed outcomes but a methodology for wanting to listen to the community's different voices. Although we brought with us the required subject knowledge to facilitate the project, we attempted to displace traditional hierarchies of expertise by placing value on facilitation and listening to the different students' responses that emerged through the open-ended process. We believe this allowed for a co-production of knowledge and shared experience with staff and students in learning about how young people understand and create space.



[Figs. 2-7]  
Schools Without Walls, Orchard  
School, Lambeth.

## Talk 2: *Thinking Through...*

In the second talk, Cooper and McCormick shared questions, principles and strategies related to the DLWP's *Thinking Through...* series of events and workshops which are pertinent to institutions moving towards an equitable and inclusive interdisciplinary model with knowledge transfer at their heart.

### *The questions addressed:*

- how an institution's building and its history can be used as a dynamic environment for learning and a tool to keep its heritage relevant to today's urgencies
- what is the civic role of an institution and how it can act in a neighbourhood to enable inclusion and exchange while uncovering and sharing wisdom collectively
- how to nurture and model equitable and reciprocal relationships within an institution reconsidering the infrastructure of staffing models.

### *The principles included:*

- depowering – to share as much as possible with as many people as possible, changing hierarchies and conversations
- decentering – to question canonical histories and put ourselves in relation to alternative pasts and possible futures
- collaboration – to increase co-production, conversation, connectedness, porosity
- compassion – to increase a sense of common humanity.

### *The strategies involved:*

- rephrasing and reorienting learning and participation to unlearning and inclusion in order to model divergent thinking and collaboration
- investigating different models to move from prediction to preparedness by highlighting radical cultural practices, addressing urgent social and political challenges, and empowering people to make change in the world
- establishing a learning commons that cultivates wisdom and personal qualities not measured by tests: creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, curiosity, humour, question asking, endurance, reliability, enthusiasm, civic mindedness, self-awareness, empathy, leadership, compassion, courage, sense of wonder, sense of beauty, resourcefulness, spontaneity, humility, wisdom, imagination.

## Engagement activities

As part of this knowledge exchange, the DLWP staff were hoping to gather insight into their current learning environment's Capital Exchange project in a way which supports their wider principles towards depowering, decentering, collaboration and compassion.

### *The Capital Exchange looks to:*

- ensure the gallery, and the building as a whole, is a high quality Learning Space
- work with visitors to explore ways of looking at and engaging with art, considering the context and placement of artworks
- encourage teachers to use the building's physical features, architectural design and unique origins as a stimulating learning resource

*In response, the Thinking Through Open Learning Spaces event invited participants to consider:*

- how different types of space constrain or enable learning
- how we can open up the process of designing and manipulating space to people with different needs or priorities

*Consequently, the Knowledge Exchange activities developed as part of the Thinking Through Open Learning Spaces event aimed to support the DLWP team by:*

- discussing *Schools without Walls* as an example of using the built environment as a learning resource which aspired to enact DLWP principles
- offering an opportunity to discuss the Capital Exchange project in a way that reflected the wider intentions of the DLWP to establish equitable relationships within the organisation and in society at large
- inviting visitor and participant reflections on the DLWP building as a learning resource, how these spaces constrain or enable learning and invite the development of speculative propositions.
- undertaking activities which model the possible use of the built environment as a learning resource and operate in accordance with the DLWP wider principles, applied as part of the event
- undertaking activities which demonstrate ways to open up the process of designing and manipulating space to people with different needs or priorities



**[Figs. 8-9]**

Thinking Through Open Learning  
Spaces talks, De La Warr  
Pavilion.

- gathering participant comments and - reflections which could be used to support and inform proposals for learning spaces within the DLWP.

### **Activity 1: Archive-led tour**

We undertook a walking tour of the De La Warr Pavilion including gallery, learning and support spaces. In each location we shared archive images of that space, drawing upon the methodologies enacted with Orchard School. While the tour was led by the DLW staff, this process of gathering around an image while inhabiting a specific environment disrupted spatial hierarchies of knowledge transmission and opened up an opportunity for all participants to share personal recollections on the space, particularly valuing the insights of local residents and long term members of staff.

As well as being an embodied enactment of a knowledge exchange methodology which aimed to bring groups together to consider the uses and experiences of place, this tour also modelled the practice of using the building as a learning resource. It granted all participants a level of familiarity with the building and provided the basis for the subsequent discussion of how learning activities throughout the building might be further supported.

### **Activity 2: Propositional drawing**

Following the tour of the building, participants were invited to consider how these existing spaces might be reconfigured or reconsidered to support or enable learning activities. Each participant chose one of the archive photographs and used an overlaid sheet of acetate to draw into and over this image. These individual responses were then collected and projected onto the wall to be used as a focal point for discussion about learning within and through the spaces of the pavilion.

The responses gathered ranged from small scale interventions or re-considerations of existing spaces for use as learning environments, to significant structural or spatial re-configurations. Where several individuals had drawn into the same archive image, the annotated acetates were overlaid to create a composite response which accommodated conflicts and subjective difference, rather than flattening individual

voices. Through this activity, participants were asked to reflect on how these propositions might open up the process of designing and manipulating space to people with different needs or priorities, while also enacting this principle.

## **Outcomes**

Both stages of the project – the initial community-focussed workshops (Stage A) and the UCL-DLWP knowledge exchange day (Stage B) – have delivered clear outcomes, for all stakeholders involved.

### **Stage A**

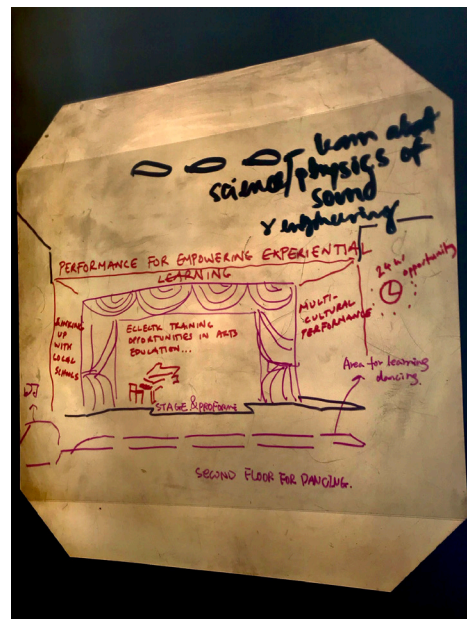
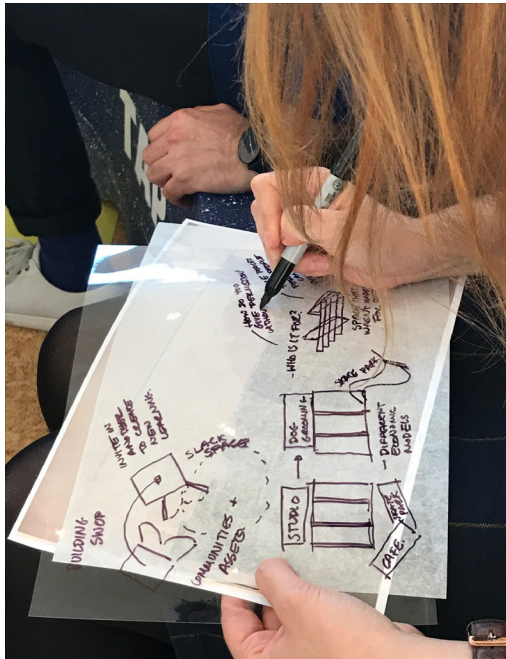
The following outcomes relate to the initial stage of the project, exploring the concept of the Open Air School with year 6 students and staff at the Orchard School, south London.

#### *Outcomes for Orchard pupils:*

- Increased understanding and sense of ownership of their school environment
- Raised awareness of the impact of architecture and the built environment
- Increased confidence from collaborating with external professionals and realisation that the creative industries are *for* them; for example young women of colour talking about their wish to pursue a career in the built environment industries
- Developed creative thinking and skills in drawing and model making
- Confidence in approaching open-ended questions and problem solving.

#### *Outcomes for Orchard staff:*

- Increased understanding of the potential of the school site and environment for learning and knowledge exchange
- Insight into how space can constrain or enable learning
- Recognition that learning can go both ways: from them to their students and vice versa, flattening out hierarchy
- Better understanding of the creative industries, enabling them to better inform the next generation
- Confidence in approaching open-ended questions and problem solving with students as 'co-explorers'.



[Figs. 10-13]

Thinking Through Open Learning Spaces activities, De La Warr Pavilion.

#### *Outcomes for the UCL team*

- Gain of 'expert knowledge' from those with lived experience in the topic of research – in this instance children learning in an open air school
- Developed methodology for creating a genuine open-ended knowledge exchange and creative process with multiple stakeholders
- Confidence in approaching open-ended questions and problem solving with students as 'co-explorers'
- Understanding of how can open up the process of designing and manipulating space to people with different needs or priorities.

### **Stage B**

These outcomes were generated by the Knowledge Exchange and activities that took place at the De La Warr Pavilion on 6 September, 2019.

#### *Outcomes for the UCL team and wider practitioners in attendance:*

- Recognising how 'unlearning' can open up opportunities for more insightful learning and understanding
- Understanding the richer outcomes that come about from a) displacing traditional hierarchies of expertise, b) placing value on facilitation, c) listening to the different students' responses that emerged through the open-ended process
- Reflective opportunity to reconsider our own personal practices.

#### *Outcomes for the DLWP, Towner Gallery and Hastings Contemporary:*

- Understanding of how the existing spaces of the pavilion might be used as learning environments – and how this could be applied to other contexts
- Insight into the types of learning activities and features of the existing spaces which are valued by a wide range of members of staff, practitioners and local organisations
- A model of how the DLWP building can effectively become a learning resource
- Suggestions for reconfiguration or redesign of the spaces to support learning activities
- A methodological model for knowledge exchange activities which could be used in the subsequent design development of learning environments as part of innovative workplace strategies.

#### *Outcomes for the creative industries (museum and gallery professionals, arts educators, artists and architects working with people to learn and benefit from the arts.):*

- Empowered young practitioners
- Young women of colour talking about and aspiring to careers in architecture
- Broader of recognition of the value of lived experience: End users have a huge amount to offer design processes and workplace strategies. Non-hierarchical, open-ended, exchange-based co-briefing and co-design processes can unlock this knowledge and enable more sensitive and responsive design
- Understanding of how the process of designing and manipulating space can be tailored to people with different needs or priorities.