Reflecting with students as partners: wellbeing in architectural education

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Organisational and historical context

Our case study is the Architecture degree at Nottingham Trent University (NTU), where Hughes and Souto teach, and from where Evans graduated in 2022. Hughes and Souto have collaborated on several wellbeing and sustainability-related research projects since 2017, and since 2020 have worked through student-staff collaborations with Evans, as research consultant, research assistant, co-designer of the curriculum and co-author.

NTU is a post-1992 university, founded in 1843 as the Government School of Design, which supported the development of skills, innovation, and growth in Nottingham's textiles industry. It then became a Polytechnic and later achieved University status. There are currently 40,000 students, and the University is 'committed to providing a stimulating and inclusive learning environment for the benefit of our students, colleagues, and communities' (Nottingham Trent University, 2022a). This is supported by The Trent Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT): 'to develop and sustain a community of practice passionate about making learning better' (Nottingham Trent University, 2022b).

The architecture course at NTU started in October 2006, validated by the Royal Institute of British Architecture (RIBA) and Architects Registration Board (ARB) as the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). The original ethos of the course was a reaction to the 'top down' nature of other courses that the founding academics had experienced during their education and prior teaching engagements. Student wellbeing was promoted in reaction to the 'all nighter' culture and power/motivation factors experienced on other courses; for example, an ethos of 'entrepreneurship' was established, empowering students to develop their own briefs and working practices. This was aimed at encouraging agency and independence for students, promoting wellbeing by giving the students a greater sense of control over their studies.

As a relatively new course, incremental updates have been made in response to student feedback, External Examiner comments and PSRB visits. With the usual churn rate of staff that architecture courses experience, the initial ethos has shifted over time and is now expressed as "Responsible design, reflective making and access to practice"- implemented via ethical and critical professionalism with a good awareness of the 'real world' issues affecting architectural practice. An outward focus on PSRBs and practice has perhaps made it harder to maintain aspects beyond the demands of readiness for practice and accreditation, and by 2019 (pre-pandemic) health and wellbeing elements of the course were limited to human

comfort in Technology modules, limited teaching of landscape design, and certain aspects of studio briefs (for example a first year 'Urban Farm' design brief, and a second year 'Making Communities' master planning exercise). New opportunities have arisen recently to look again at wellbeing on the course; the Covid 19 pandemic brought the issue to the fore, and new PSRB guidance has been produced to ensure that sustainability is embedded in the curriculum.

Specifications of the project

As a school of Architecture in the 21st century, we have promoted sustainability as part of the design process. But it is only recently that the link between designing for wellbeing and designing sustainably has gained widespread acceptance, for example in the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the 2020 New European Bauhaus initiative. Our understanding of wellbeing aligns with the World Health Organisation (2021), whereby

> Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. […] Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. […] A society's well-being can be determined by the extent to which they are resilient, build capacity for action, and are prepared to transcend challenges.

Consequently, we aim to promote a learning environment and design strategies in which we can all thrive, that improve our quality of life and highlight the importance of wellbeing for academics and students. This is especially relevant within the context of Architectural education. Poor wellbeing in the architectural profession has been highlighted by the RIBA and the Architects Benevolent Society, and the literature and data on wellbeing in Architectural Education are rather alarming: one early clarion call was a survey that highlighted the burden of student debt, a culture of long working hours, and concerns that students were not being well prepared for their working lives (Waite and Braidwood, 2016). The deteriorating mental health of students in Architecture was worsened by the impact of Covid 19, with reports that one in two students were suffering from mental health problems and a decay in their wellbeing (Ing, 2020).

The Architects' Mental Wellbeing Forum published the *Architects' Mental Wellbeing Toolkit* in 2019, to 'make architecture not only accessible and sustainable as a profession, but welcoming and supportive to everyone' (p 3). This publication, and others published by the RIBA, acknowledge the need to change the culture: a long and difficult process. *Study Architecture Well* (Russell, Thompson and Jones, 2021b) aims to support students in Architecture 'to do well during their studies and, importantly, to stay well as they cope with the opportunities, stresses and strains of learning' (p 6). The RIBA has created another guide, aimed at early career practitioners, identifying ways to *Practise Architecture Well* (Russell, Thompson and Jones, 2021a).

The publication *of Happy by Design. A Guide to Architecture and Mental Wellbeing* (Channon, 2018) is another significant source to introduce wellbeing as a design approach, raising an awareness of the impact that architecture has on users, and how the lessons learnt on sustainability, orientation, materiality, light, etc., can impact our happiness. This publication

reinforces the fact that students already know solutions that can enhance wellbeing, they just do not recognise them as a design goal.

Our work acknowledges "that mental wellbeing is a central element of each individual's experience at university and their ability to persist and flourish" (Thompson and Song, 2021, p 125). Our contribution is a reflection on a staff-student collaboration, in an authentic attempt to improve this situation. By engaging with the definition of Students as Partners (SaP) as "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Felten, Cook-Sather and Bovill 2014, pp 6-7), we reflect on the journey that led us, academics and a student, to collaborate and implement changes to the curriculum in an attempt to improve our wellbeing in Architectural education.

Discussion of pedagogy/practice

The development of student-staff partnerships has been incremental for the authors involved in this project: working from interventions into our teaching practice and research projects involving increasing levels of student autonomy, before fully realising the potential to involve students as partners in curriculum redesign. Though initially based on expediency, as a response to the context determined by Covid 19 and consequent restrictions, it has helped us to develop authentic working relationships which have now transcended the timeline and focus of one Student-Staff collaboration and have changed our scholarship approach with other ongoing spin-off projects.

The OECD has reported on the benefits of research-based education, whereby students carry out research as part of the teaching/ learning experience; moreover, it suggests that students should be engaged in evaluating their own education (Osnes and Skaug, 2019, p 39). This is something that we have evaluated as co-authors, exploring issues of knowledge (both from lecturers, being familiar with SoTL, and students, having enough knowledge about their studies to be able to evaluate the lecturers' approach) as well as issues of power and agency (when partnership is done as curricular or extracurricular activities). But we understand the challenges of SaP, since our own scholarship practice has moved intuitively from summer research projects, designed by the tutors, co-delivered with students to actively promoting students to co-design the curriculum with tutors. As a result, we have reflected on the challenges and opportunities, on the nature of these partnerships as "troublesome, transformative, irreversible, and integrative", as Felten et al. describe them (2014, p 186), requiring us both, as students and tutors, to engage with an authentic reflection on what the partnership is, and its thresholds.

Commensurate with the partnership approach, the research team adopted an auto-ethnographic methodology to reflect on and evaluate our roles, challenges and opportunities in the student-staff collaboration, similar to the approach used by Marquis (2017). Our proposed methodology obtained a favourable response from NTU's Research Ethics Committee.

Evans Hughes Souto

- Research: Discovering Sneinton's Identity (2016)
- Research: Co-designing Carrington (2017)
- Studio 3: Wellbeing theme (2020-21)
- Context 3: Sacred spaces theme (2020-21)
- Studio 2: Making Communities (2020-21)
- Research bid: Green & Blue spaces (2020)
- Research: Access to Green Spaces (2021)
- Publication: Greening the Built Environment (2021)
- Studio 3: New Bauhaus theme (2021-22)
- Context 3: Wellbeing theme (2021-22)
- Tech 3: Sustainable design (2021-22)
- Research: Sustainability in Enterprise (2021-22)
- Research: TILT wellbeing in Architecture (2022)
- Research: Sustainability and wellbeing pedagogy (2022)
- Practice: Sustainability policy (2022)
- Tech 3: Sustainability & wellbeing embedded (2022-23)
- Context 3: Wellbeing theme (2022-23)
- Studio 3: Sustainability & wellbeing in Higher Education (2022-23)
- Buildings and spaces: Places for wellbeing (2022-23)
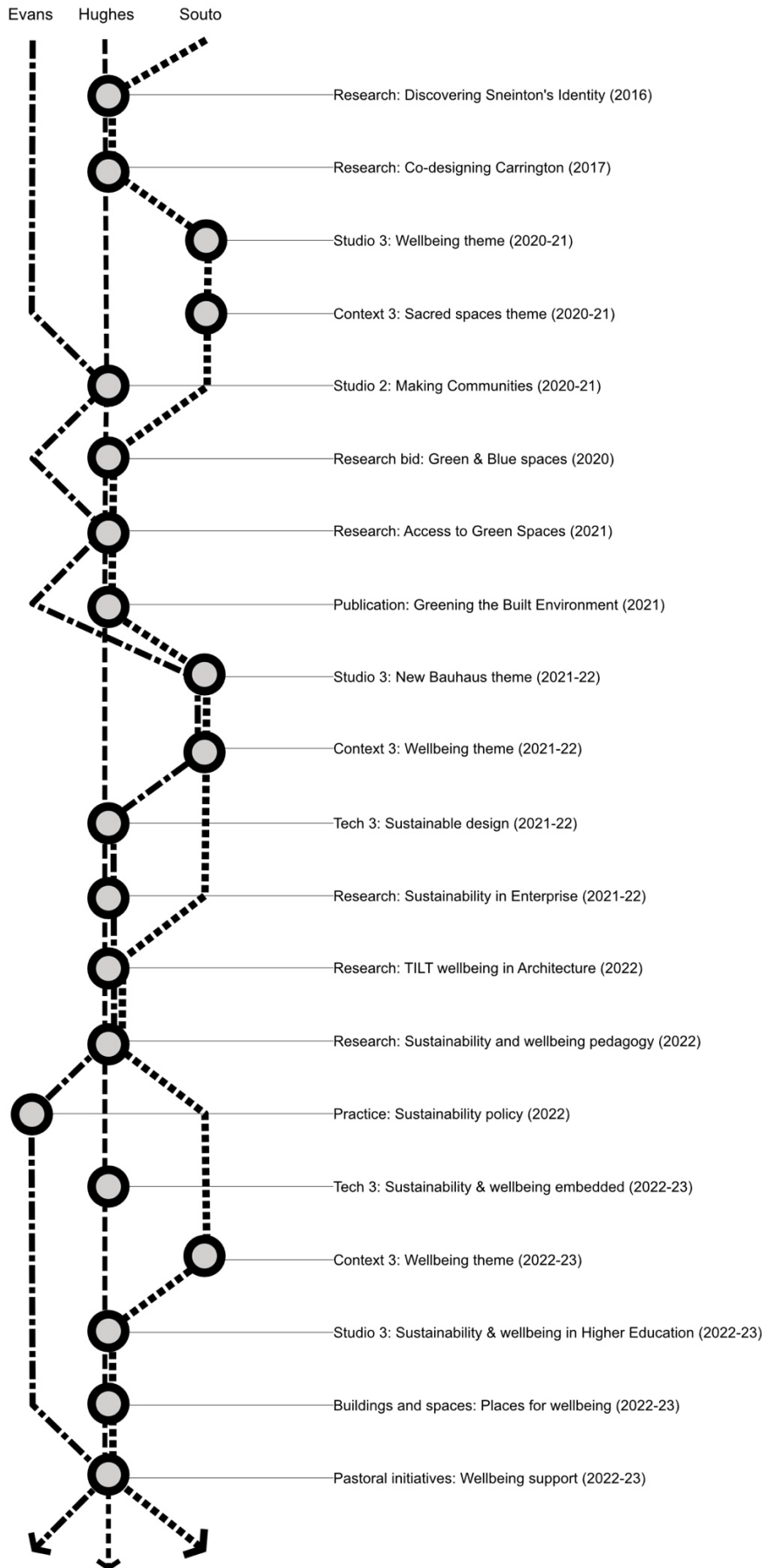- Pastoral initiatives: Wellbeing support (2022-23)

Figure 1: Mapping the authors' interactions around sustainability and wellbeing, towards student-as-partners

Implementation

Both members of staff have long sought opportunities to engage in research activities with our students. In some cases, this was part of our modules. In others, we developed summer research placements. It was through the offering of these projects that Evans (student) first engaged in research with Hughes and Souto (academics). In June 2021, Evans applied for a scholarship to work with Souto and Hughes on a research project related to Heritage and Access to Green Spaces. Souto's approach was to encourage the students to contribute through their own expertise: research skills, group work, and especially, visualisation of research outcomes. Evans perceived this as the beginnings of her professional experience as an autonomous researcher, especially motivated by the nature of the live project, which felt more vital than a brief based on a fictitious scenario.

The following academic year (2021-22), Hughes designed an optional live project Technology coursework whereby students produced a sustainability report on local business properties. Evans perceived this as not only boosting her employability skills, but highlighting the value of live projects, directly helping the local economy. At this stage, Evans was transitioning from student to design researcher or research assistant, depending on whether her work was done within a module assessment, or a summer scholarship.

In parallel, Evans was studying Architecture in Context 3 with Souto, connecting her research and design project with the topic of wellbeing. Having a choice allowed students to become more autonomous, despite the learning outcomes and submission requirements' restrictions. Souto approached Evans to apply for the TILT Student/Staff Co-creation fund, wherein a student applies for research project funding, with a staff member as collaborator. This opportunity aligned their research interests and curriculum improvement goals. Her final report included recommendations to highlight the role of wellbeing and sustainability in the Architecture curriculum. Evans's research was supported by both academics, and other students acting as research assistants/partners, this gave Evans the experience of leadership in research. She conducted surveys, workshops and a focus group to facilitate an open discussion about improving the role of well-being in their experience as students.
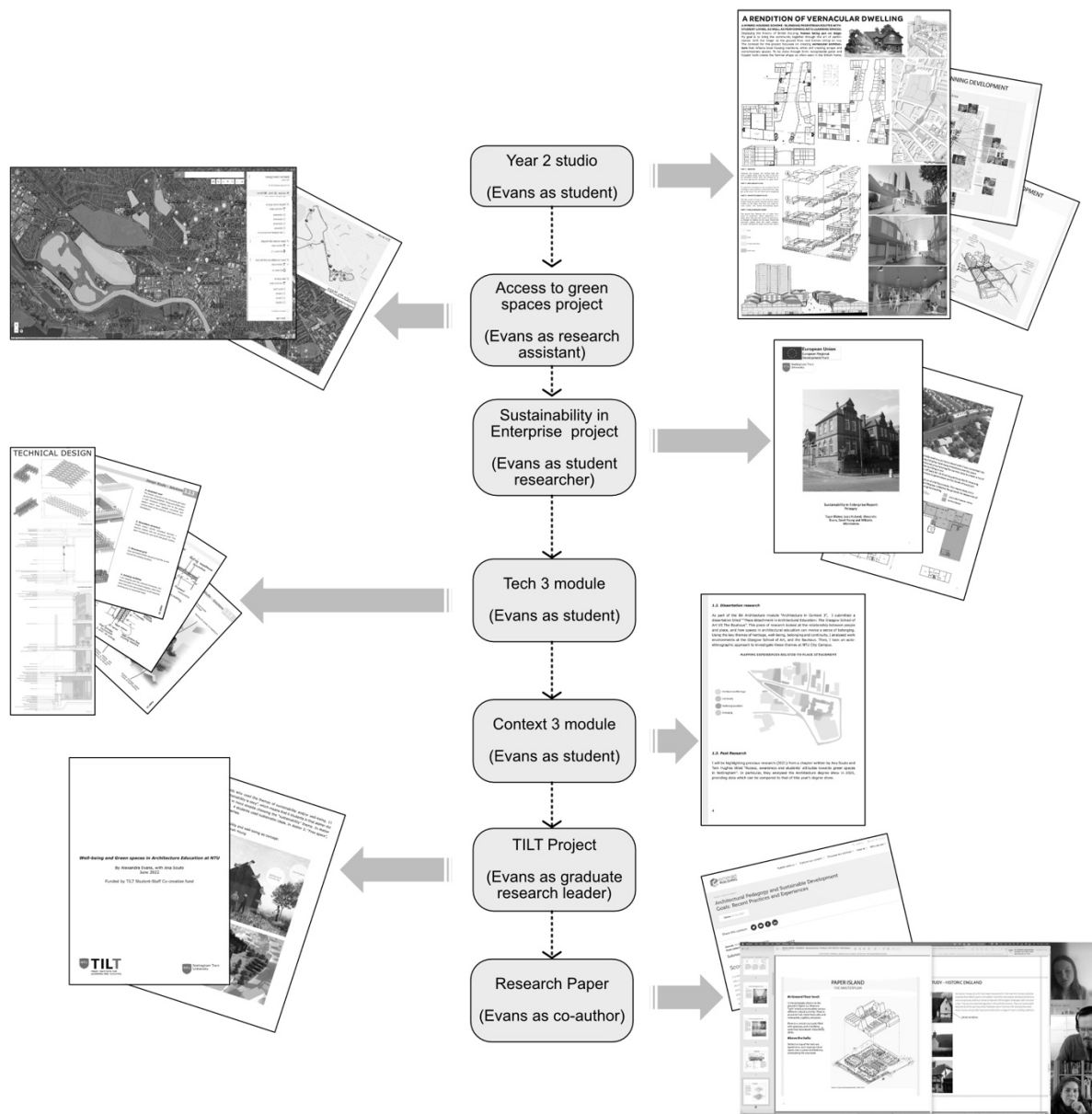
Figure 2: Timeline of Evan's journey from student to co-author

Impact

The production of Evans's report prompted us to pilot several changes to the curriculum, having a broader reach and impact on current students. But the impact on the partners in this process has been wide-ranging. Evans's review highlighted that sustainability and wellbeing were primarily reflected in the reading lists, and through teaching sessions, but not in the grading criteria or the grade descriptors. This has now been improved by more specific action, such as the studio Atelier on "Sustainability and Wellbeing" and the Tech 3 module (by Hughes), where specific requirements for wellbeing and sustainability were introduced into module documents, teaching sessions and grading criteria. As Course Leader for the 2022-23 academic year, Hughes ensured that any outcomes related to sustainability or wellbeing were reflected in module documentation, grading criteria and grade descriptors, attempting to overcome what Evans described as these elements being "encouraged but not specifically asked for". This is a significant example of how our partnership has lasted beyond the summer scholarship: it is still impacting our practice and the learning experience of current students.

In Souto's Architecture in Context module, students can pursue wellbeing and sustainability research to influence their design approaches. Souto has also promoted exercise during the breaks within her seminars (MArch) and invited students to do walking tutorials (BArch), in her efforts to support the mental health and wellbeing of both students and tutors. To provide further, non-grade-based incentives to engage with wellbeing in their studio design projects, Souto instigated a Head of School's wellbeing prize to be awarded at the opening of the Degree Show this year.

Since producing the TILT report, Evans, Souto and Hughes have had meetings to discuss how changes have been addressed. Evans feels that it has been an important step, and the initiative to improve students' wellbeing will, and has been, greatly appreciated. The student-staff collaboration gave Evans real-world research skills that greatly improved employability, confidence, and agency in practice. The opportunity to explore interests beyond the conventional curriculum, via scholarships, extra projects and the final-year essay, gave Evans a greater sense of wellbeing - given that she was able to conceptualise her own ideas and be more enthusiastic. Overall, the student-staff partnership led to more skills, autonomy, and wellbeing during her studies, as a recent graduate whilst completing the TILT research, and in her professional working environment beyond the BArch course, and she has provided a path which other students, as well as staff, can follow to explore collective wellbeing in education.

Overall, this partnership has had a transformative impact on all of us. We find ourselves promoting, working together, and facilitating the implementation of Student-Staff partnerships beyond the scholarship. For example, this year we (Hughes and Souto) have been awarded three further summer scholarships from TILT to keep transforming the curriculum. Still under the umbrella of SaP and the importance of wellbeing in Architectural Education, we are now co-designing the curriculum with our students under the lens of inclusive teaching, so both students and academics can thrive at our university.

Moreover, and in tune with the organic development of our collaborations, more students are sharing their interest in reviewing the curriculum with us. Several graduates volunteered as wellbeing mentors for students in Year 2, which has led to a pilot implementation during this academic year. This role is more specifically wellbeing-based and is aimed at students on all years of the course, instead of existing programmes developed for first year students. So far, the response has been very positive. We will co-design this role further with the graduate mentors over the summer and aim to implement it more widely next academic year.

It has been gratifying to see several wellbeing initiatives being taken on by students. A third-year student who suffered a bereavement has set up a student society, NTU Grief Support, providing a safe community for people dealing with loss. A student on the Masters course, has implemented a 'greening up' initiative in the studio with students caring for pot plants, which is the main case study for her Dissertation. Similarly, two other students in the MArch are reviewing the curriculum as part of their dissertations to offer recommendations to the team: this shows that both students and academics should collaborate more often to introduce changes to the curriculum. Students have the experience and knowledge, and should feel they also have agency to change the system.

Evaluation and lessons learned

As we co-author this article, we acknowledge a significant change in Evans's role since we started our collaboration: from a subject within the study to a co-author on an equal footing. Evans, who graduated in July 2022, has now looked back, and reflected on this experience with some distance, whilst currently working in practice. Evans felt that as a student, she perceived some of those collaborations as more restrictive, since "it is all going towards a grade" or affecting the project development, whilst the summer scholarship felt more professional, like her current practice. For the academics, this collaboration has also brought up new reflections as educators and researchers: for Souto this has been a turning point in her practice, embracing SaP in a more authentic way. Hughes feels that the work has brought together a long-standing interest in community development across his teaching and research practice – it has been inspiring to see students taking agency in creating their own wellbeing projects.

Our reflections highlighted several opportunities and challenges. Overall, we have embraced student-staff collaborations as a great opportunity to work more closely with our students, promote their agency, and ensure that they thrive through their studies, reinforcing the importance of wellbeing. More specifically, we have embraced Evans's recommendations as an opportunity to update the module documentation and increase the profile of sustainability and wellbeing on the course. We have created a dialogue between students and staff, and implemented pastoral initiatives (wellbeing mentors).

On the other hand, we have felt restricted by the PSRB guidance, which tends to be a good fit with a traditional architecture course structure, but which can limit our scope to do things differently. However, the RIBA is interested in the wellbeing of students, and we will share our initiatives with them at the visit in July 2023. We have engaged in some deep thinking about implementing our initiatives without adding to (and in fact, hopefully, reducing) workload and stress for staff and students alike. And finally, as a challenge that could become an opportunity, we must acknowledge that for SaP to really work, power relationships will need to change, and this may well be uncomfortable at first for those involved. Our aim is to realign power relationships and increase student agency by promoting these kinds of approaches with our colleagues and student body.

To conclude, we would like to emphasize the value of meaningful collaborations with students. And this applies to any discipline and scenario, not only to Architectural education. An important factor of our journey, and an important lesson learnt, was the organic way in which it developed over time. The legacy of our partnership is visible not only in the impact it had on us, but also in how it is creating a new community of practice, a culture of being involved, in promoting active collaborations between students and academics. Understanding this value, we are now promoting these collaborations in a proactive way, supporting this new community of practice and partnership. Consequently, we encourage others to engage in similar initiatives, with a conscious and active drive for partnerships to become an efficient, effective, and natural way of working: students as partners reshaping the curriculum together.

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