Stories, lessons and principles for putting people and communities at the heart of the design process.

Edited by Sheppard Robson
About the editors
Sheppard Robson is one of the UK’s most established architectural practices, with a reputation for thoughtful and responsible designs.

In the practice’s eighty-some year history, Sheppard Robson has designed award-winning architecture, interior design and master-planning projects around the world, building a strong reputation across numerous typologies.

From our offices in London, Manchester and Glasgow, the founding principles of innovation and sustainability continue to shape the work of the practice.

The work of the practice benefits from an ability to have a constructive dialogue with clients and end-users, as well as collaborating closely with other members of the project team throughout the design and delivery of a project.
Stories, lessons and principles for putting people and communities at the heart of the design process.

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A process that positions end users as experts to enable meaningful contributions towards design processes and outcomes.

To facilitate the above, architects become conductors of the design process, responsible for shaping strategic visions and championing empathetic, human-centric design.
Asking Difficult Questions

Peter Dye, reflects on 80-some years of the practice and speculates on what the future might bring for the wider built environment.

Listening

Setting the Agenda

Rachel Cooper OBE discusses the principles and practicalities of co-creation with James Jones.

Mediating Need: Design that Listens

Charles Scott reflects on working in sub-Saharan African cities with the charity WaterAid to co-create solutions that balance immediate need with long-term vision.

John Garrett provides the client perspective, describing WaterAid’s efforts to build trust with local communities.

Trusting

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Rory Olcayto explores the role of fiction as a co-creation device, drawing on ‘Brent Cross South: The Handbook.’

Envisioning Empathy

Alan Bainbridge writes about using co-creation as an engagement tool to design a workplace sensitive to neurodiversity at the BBC Cymru Wales headquarters.

Humanising Architecture

Photographer and architect, Roman Koester, documents the living, breathing nature of a selection of Sheppard Robson buildings in use.

Empowering

Constructing Contact Theatre

Matt Fenton and Jake Howarth discuss the roles of youth governance and co-creation in the redevelopment of Manchester’s Contact Theatre with Jasmin Eastwood.

Building Community at Frendsbury Gardens

Nadine Hibbert BEM reflects on the processes and lessons of co-creating an outdoor classroom for Frendsbury Gardens with Tom Kyle and Patricia de Isidoro.

Advocating

Co-creating a Sustainable Future

Sarah Cary and Alan Shingler discuss co-creation and its role in promoting socially and environmentally sustainable development, as told by Adam Branson.

Looking Forward

Rosie Havener and Dan Burr consider the future of the architectural profession suggesting principles to facilitate ethical development through co-creation.
Asking Difficult Questions

Peter Dye, Sheppard Robson

The Jicwood Bungalow, designed in 1944, utilised innovative stressed timber skin from the aircraft industry and a prefabricated concept to deliver fast, efficient housing in response to the social needs of the time.

Pioneering use of concrete shell structures at the Swan Hunter shipyard, in Wallsend, Tyne and Wear, epitomises mid-century sustainable design—light, large-scale and open, with an exposed concrete structure and a geometric, modernist aesthetic.

When Sheppard Robson marked its 80th year in practice, it seemed natural to reflect on the practice and wider profession, and to think about what the next 80 years might bring. We asked the questions: What is the role of the architect, and how is it changing? How will the profession adapt in the future? How can the architect be of most value to society? These questions transcend an individual entity such as Sheppard Robson, and in order for them to be grappled with, we must acknowledge and listen to a cross-section of disparate voices beyond those of architects—including community members, educators, local government representatives, clients, and more.

To unpack these questions, Sheppard Robson held a series of discussions, bringing a wide range of voices together around one table—allowing them to temporarily take pause from their day-to-day teaching, designing, writing, making—to contemplate big ideas. Rather predictably, the resulting conversations produced a broad spectrum of views on what will most impact the future architecture: the rise of AI; the schism of design and delivery; whether we can trust tech giants; and the power of research, as just a few.

Although many valuable directions for enquiry were raised, several insights struck us as particularly poignant. Rory Olcayto, Writer, Critic and former Chief Executive of the architecture charity Open City, made the statement: “Architecture often feels more like a club than a profession.” His comment made reference to the perception of the profession as insular, which was further reinforced by Ellie Stathaki, Architecture Editor of Wallpaper* magazine, who questioned architects’ ability to communicate and engage—not only with professionals involved in the built environment, but with the wider public as well.

This provocation directed the conversation towards the fundamental question: are architects good listeners? We believe that architects do listen—they interpret and build upon the ideas of others—but how can they become further attuned to the needs of others? How can architects leverage their position to assemble a more diverse set of opinions and expertise?
From our perspective, the concept that both underpins and begins to address these enquiries is that of co-creation.

The ensuing publication is study on this term, unpacking what it really to co-create. This publication provides a space where the process of listening takes centre stage, and seeks to address the question, “How can we push engagement further?”

We start by defining co-creation as distinct from collaboration. While collaboration seeks feedback on already developed proposals to inform specific design parameters, analysis or review, co-creation fosters engagement from the inception of a project to help establish its overall direction.

Co-creation asks more from our spaces: How can a workplace promote good mental health? How can we empower young people to have a more prominent role in shaping our built environment? How can co-creation engage with global issues such as climate change?

We believe the answers to these questions can be solved by adopting the openness and breadth of thinking that co-creation encourages. Through heightened engagement we can contest the “us and them” narrative, resulting in designs that more effectively serve users, organisations and communities.
Listening

Listening is the fundamental first step in co-creation. Successful co-creation is predicated on openness, dialogue and making the space to hear the unexpected.
What separates co-creation from co-design, consultation, collaboration? How can architects be conductors of a structured and insightful engagement process? Leading co-creation academic, Rachel Cooper, discusses the principles and practicalities of co-creation with Sheppard Robson’s James Jones, exploring the role of the architect as a facilitator between the vision and delivery of a project, and between the design team and end users. Rachel explains how co-creation presents an opportunity for architects to be central to a process that balances physical requirements with human experience.
To start, the words co-design, co-creation, even collaboration, are often used interchangeably. What do they mean and how are they distinct?

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**James Jones**

To start, the words co-design, co-creation, even collaboration, are often used interchangeably. What do they mean and how are they distinct?

**Rachel Cooper**

Co-creation is an open process where everyone—stakeholders, users, project team—work together to establish the direction of a project. But this is not designing; a whole community can’t design a project! This responsibility falls to the specialist design team who collaborate together—and this is co-design.

‘Co-creation is an open process where everyone—stakeholders, users, project team—work together to establish the direction of a project.’

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This distinction is important because some people see the co-creation process as eroding the responsibility of the architect, but you’re saying the consultation and design phases are separate. This gives the architect the opportunity to be the conductor of both processes. How do you get a co-creation project off the ground?

**RC**

For a start, you can’t expect the co-creation process to do all the work for you. An organisation needs to understand its core values: Why is this project important? What is this new building for? This is pre-brief and is Stage 0 of a project. This is not: We need a bigger this or smaller that. It’s more fundamental. For instance: Do you want to be a leader in sustainability? Do you want to change the way you relate to staff or the community?

**JJ**

These values will also give you a yardstick to test whether you’re making the right decisions; it gives you clarity and something to refer back to. When we were working on Contact Theatre, we had some clear goals, so when it came to the crunch decisions, we could measure decisions against the core values.

**RC**

Yes, someone has to show leadership at the start and set the agenda.

**JJ**

Once this Stage 0 is complete and the core values of a project are established, what next?

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This openness is important.

**JJ**

But many people involved are worried about the co-creation process turning into design by committee.

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‘Co-creation can’t work if there’s not a clear structure—it needs to be a facilitated process.’

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Rachel Cooper OBE, Distinguished Professor of Design Management and Policy, Lancaster University
The ‘messier side to the design process’ as experienced during consultations for the redesign of Manchester’s Contact Theatre.

The ‘beautifully resolved, useful and meaningful spaces’ that resulted from a co-creation process at the Lancaster Institute of Art.
You need, what I call, divergent thinking, at the start of a project, and you need as much of this as possible. But you also need convergent thinking and a kind of filter to process the range of thinking. To do this, you need a clear project structure. You should know who your decision informers are (community, staff, etc.), your decision shaper (the architect), the decisions maker (project client team) and project takers (the ultimate client decision). Managing expectations is about educating the client and trusting in a structure that can keep dialogue open.

The focus on co-creation seems to be at the front end, but surely this approach needs to be adopted throughout the project and beyond completion?

Stages are necessary but shouldn’t be restrictive. People want to be linear. The problem with this is that as you progress through a project, there’s more pressure on the quantitative aspects of the project (budget, programme). The nearer you get to completion, and the more qualitative, soft aspects (how people will feel in the space, how it will impact them psychologically and physically, what the designs say about the organisation) get lost. But once the project is completed all the qualitative aspects come back into focus, because people start using the building and the project needs to support its users “soft” requirements.

So, continuity is key. When the project goes through different focuses—quantitative and qualitative—there should be a team of custodians who understand the original vision for the project.

That’s part of design management, ensuring there’s discourse of qualitative and quantitative all the way through.

Is this the architect’s role?

I think it’s up to large architectural practices and education institutions to be teaching architects to have the confidence to be the conductors of projects. It’s not just writing a brief, but how you can be the custodian of the vision for the project and the subtle aspects of what is going to make a project a success.

It’s the architect’s job to communicate the aspirations and potential to shape experience from the early stages of a projects, and they need to engage with people in any way possible. I think it’s the architect’s job to use any means possible to get stakeholders to understand the power of the abstract qualities of a project from the outset and to create a vision from the starting point.

I think architecture is constantly thinking about what its role is. Many have been speaking about the profession being in danger, but I think it’s trying to work out what’s its wider role in the built environment—is—and what impact they have on human beings, how they live, their health. What is the architect ultimately responsible for?

What are the barriers preventing co-creation from happening and the architect becoming the linchpin of the process?

It’s about trust. There’s a view that architects come up with a concept and then are wedded to that idea and solution, so people don’t trust them not to be dogmatic.

Architects are taught that a concept that perfectly solves the brief can’t be touched; whilst actually I don’t think that’s right. Of course you need a strong rationale but it needs to be flexible so later it can be adapted.

But you also need a conductor. Architects can be very good at this. But if they are too wedded to a concept they can’t be an independent facilitator of the co-creation process.

The purity of concept is engrained in how you [the architect] think, so there will need to be a cultural and educational change. But in both commercial and public sector work, change is so common, whether it be the market, budgets, trends—there needs to be an open-mindedness and flexibility.

In short, we need to embrace the messier side of design—the coming together, the friction, the process of mediation—in pursuit of creating beautifully resolved, useful and meaningful spaces.
Mediating Need: Design that Listens

Charles Scott is an Associate Partner at Sheppard Robson.

Many cities are built on grand plans, with schematics and statistics shaping visions on an ambitious and massive scale. It is the job of the urbanist—through training, experience and creative instinct—to humanise the data, creating a civic and social approach that understands the people the project serves. Projects at the urban scale must mediate a range of tensions: between the macro and the micro; the generic and the personal; between shaping cities and listening to the individual. A co-creation ethos is key to this multi-scalar approach, gathering many perspectives from the earliest opportunity and then drawing out the common threads that link them together. It is essential that during this process architects remove preconceived notions and remain open to hearing unexpected ideas, opinions, and feedback from the communities and stakeholders they serve. This allows space for new and unexpected feedback to come to the fore—but it takes a delicate balance to honour and act on this information, while remaining true to the holistic project brief.

‘A co-creation ethos is key to this multi-scalar approach, gathering many perspectives from the earliest opportunity and then drawing out the common threads that link them together.’

This is especially critical when grappling with complex urban contexts, as was the case for WaterAid’s project to boost spatial planning capacity for water, sanitation, and climate change resilience in four of Africa’s fastest-growing cities: Lusaka, Kinshasa, Maputo, and Lagos. The cities were chosen for their range of water related issues—including sea level rise, flooding, water pollution, and lack of sanitation infrastructure—while offering contrasting cultural and geographic contexts.

Charles Scott reflects on working in sub-Saharan African cities with the charity WaterAid, where the huge scale, complexity and significance of these projects required co-creation-driven engagement, attuned to the many voices of stakeholders and communities. His experience in Lagos highlights the challenge of honouring unexpected insights that can arise during an open engagement process, and how architects must balance this information with a broad and holistic understanding of a project brief to design solutions that address both immediate need and long-term vision.
A boy runs across sandbags to avoid walking through the wastewater that flows freely through the informal settlement area of Ajeromi-Ifelodun in Lagos, Nigeria.

Proposals from a case study undertaken in Makoko, Lagos, based on the retention of the existing settlement rather than embarking on a large-scale redevelopment of the area; a co-ordinated system of waste collection by barge, modern septic tanks, and piped plumbing could help control environmental issues stemming from lack of sanitation.
Planning for city-wide water management is an enormous challenge, and working in rapidly urbanising cities implies an added layer of complexity. In addition to water-related issues, interventions must navigate the tensions of urban sprawl, informal infrastructures, complex governance structures, poverty and inequality. This level of complexity necessitates a multi-pronged approach, one which takes into consideration the many disparate voices of those who will be impacted within a wide strategic framework.

Such was the case in Lagos, where a large-scale, systemic framework supported by individual testimony was essential to designing a solution for all 21 million residents of this growing metropolis. As a coastal city characterised by islands, an extensive network of canals, and floating villages, 70% of residents live at high risk of flooding. Sanitation is provided informally, with ad hoc septic tanks or pit latrines canals as the primary form of waste management, and many are simply left without sanitation. Central areas are characterised by a compact, organic urban fabric, contrasting with unplanned sprawl on the urban peripheries. Informal infrastructure provision has organically developed in tandem with these typologies, borne out of necessity and self-reliance. Here, a water management framework was necessary to respond to both large scale public health concerns and burgeoning climate risk. Our initial response was to implement off-site sanitation solutions, due to the complexity of the urban grain, but formalising this system has the potential to be incredibly disruptive, and if done without sensitivity could result in displacing the people we were seeking to help. A history of failed one-off interventions also highlighted the need to design a system that truly responds to Lagos’ unique form and the many individuals and communities that comprise it.

In order to avoid the mistakes of interventions past, we adopted a co-creation-driven approach to engagement—consulting a network of built environment professionals, NGOs, utility authorities, local and national government to further define the framework for the project. This was informed by individual testimonies of community representatives, whose guidance was essential to understanding the human scale, lived reality of what this project should achieve. This approach was at once bottom-up and community-driven, while working within a top-down, strategic framework, producing a web of opinions with many overlapping—as well as contradicting—viewpoints.

It was from this wealth of information, that we drew out an unexpected common concern: electricity. From the top down, the Water and Waste Management authorities identified new electricity infrastructure as essential for pumping water offsite and running sanitation systems. From the bottom up, community leaders identified electricity provisions as on par with access to safe drinking water and sanitation to alleviate poverty at the human scale.

‘The profession reconciles the present and future, weaving together the grand plan and the human details. It is the profession’s role as conductor of the processes, and not just as a creative force, that has maximum impact.’

It was this unexpected insight—gained from a unique engagement process that truly valued multiple perspectives—that shaped our solution, mediating the gap between responding to immediate need, while intervening in the long-term issues associated with water management and climate change. This knowledge enabled a masterplan strategy that mitigates the effects of climate change through short-term, long-term, and future-proofing approaches. Future-proofing took the form of identifying different areas of likely urban expansion and proposing the water and sanitation infrastructure that would enable sustainable development. Areas of sustainable re-densification were also identified, enabling a phased strategy for water supply and off-site sanitation.

The WaterAid project—both familiar and drastically different to other projects I work on—served as a poignant reminder of the purpose of architects. The profession reconciles the present and future, weaving together the grand plan and the human details. It is the profession’s role as conductor of the processes, and not just as a creative force, that has maximum impact. I believe that architects have the problem-solving judgment, and most importantly, the curiosity to take on complex problems within our wider environment.

As architects we may not initially know how to solve an identified problem, but we know how to bring people together to gain the insight needed for truly effective solutions. In doing so, it is imperative that communities and stakeholders feel empowered to engage—that they trust their voices will be heard, their input valued, and their feedback honoured—for critical feedback to come to the fore. Through co-creation-driven engagement, we can enable this, resulting in places where communities feel a sense of ownership, which ultimately determines whether or not an intervention will be successful.

Building community partnerships rooted in trust is a key piece of WaterAid’s work and—like genuine co-creation—takes time and investment to truly understand both the aspirations and challenges that people and communities face. WaterAid has been actively involved in water and sanitation in Lagos for the last 20 years, during which we have built a deep understanding and trusted relationships with the city’s communities, government bodies, institutions, and the forces that influence it.

Investing in this level of understanding is vital when promoting cooperation between parties, to ensure not only that our projects are implemented, but also that they are carried out to the highest possible standard. Cultivating relationships with community representatives has allowed us to enter and work as a relatively neutral entity; this is critical for a context in which past failed interventions have resulted in displacement or otherwise eroded trust between people, organisations, and local government.

By building these relationships, we can then extend community trust to our collaborators, such as Sheppard Robson. The ‘City-Wide Urban Planning for Sanitation and Water’ project is a departure from our usual work, and Sheppard Robson’s technical expertise, in combination with the knowledge and relationships that WaterAid has nurtured in Lagos, builds the necessary capacity for implementing such an ambitious plan. This builds the community buy-in necessary for successful projects and creates the unique conditions for implementing an unprecedented system for water and sanitation.

It is essential that local people feel ownership over the project. By investing in relationships with community leaders we can set a new precedent for future projects rooted in trust, leading to greater impact, while creating a clearer vision for solutions that balance patience with urgency, conflict with resolution, and the past with the future.

—John Garrett, Senior Policy Analyst, Development Finance, WaterAid
Trusting

True co-creation is rooted in trust. Trust must be given and demonstrated from the onset of a project, to establish working foundations that will guide the project through to completion.
How can architects and developers work with communities to build a better future? Where trust has been eroded, how can we work to not only repair relationships, but to move forward to a more inclusive, agile, and informed type of development? Martyn Evans and Dan Burr join Jack Sallabank in conversation on how co-creation processes can build the necessary trust to inform progressive, community-driven regeneration.

Building a Common Purpose

Martyn Evans is the Creative Director at U+I, and Dan Burr is a Partner at Sheppard Robson. Written by Jack Sallabank, Founder of Future Places Studio.
Jack Sallabank  Martyn, as a property developer working on large regeneration schemes, would you agree that the term regeneration is often perceived as negative, and even toxic, amongst communities?

Martyn Evans  Yes, I would agree. Development and regeneration are seen as things that are done to people, rather than with them or for them. That’s because the property industry has always been driven by money. It’s a money-making business, and that traditionally hasn’t lent itself to working collaboratively with communities.

It’s incredible that a group of people take ownership of a piece of land and create extraordinary profit out of the development of that land by forcing massive change on people. Those people often don’t want it, they don’t understand it, and they feel like their views as the end user haven’t been given any thought.

JS  How then can the development industry work to build trust with those communities, and what role does co-creation have in this process?

ME  Good placemaking starts with asking: What is this place you are making? Is it a school, is it a shop, is it offices? To find out what a place needs, you have to spend time in the place and understand the place. You need to find the history and soul of a place. You need to meet people and listen to them. At the moment that happens at the public consultation stage of a development process, but public consultation is not about co-creation; it’s just showing your development plans, asking people if they like it, and then trying to mitigate the complaints if there are any.

Dan Burr  Martyn mentioned the importance of finding the history and soul of a place, and that is so important when you are trying to build trust with communities. You are trained as an architect to sweep away mess and impose rigour and order; but what people often feel comfortable with is the antithesis of what we, the architect, might think is needed. That is where the design process can get really interesting to me—it forces us to reassess and be as inventive as possible. Retained elements in a scheme automatically give a development project authenticity, legacy, and something to anchor the scheme, but they also offer the opportunity to keep an important route or open up a new view. Understanding what those critical elements should be requires architects to ask the right questions and listen to what communities have to say.

ME On our Mayfield project in Manchester, we were the only developer who wanted to keep all of the heritage buildings as part of our bid—everyone else wanted to flatten them and start again. Retaining heritage buildings makes a scheme much harder to deliver, but it is so important to the history of the place, and it helps to build trust with the communities that we are working with.

‘That, for me, is where co-creation starts: a common purpose that everyone works towards.’  ME

DB  On our Chrisp street project we identified heritage elements related to festival of Britain—the clocktower and small shop units with flats above—as well as the existing market and the more recent Idea Store, to retain. This made the project much more complex to deliver, and, as it turned out, it wasn’t the density or the design that was controversial, but the question of how to retain and improve the market square. The market was the focus for the local community, and it was important to maintain continuity with existing traders and allow it to evolve without being ‘sanitized.’

To address this, with our client Poplar Harca we created an ongoing open exhibition on site, featuring all our designs and models, to allow more comprehensive community input. The public was free to come and go when they had time, with conversations playing out in that space daily. This process helped us build trust and make more informed decisions. Ultimately, this resulted in a more sophisticated proposal for the market and a package of measures to keep the traders operating—and this helped to keep the spirit of place alive.

JS  Why doesn’t the process of co-creation happen more often?

ME  Development—even before you’ve got a planning permission—is expensive and risky, and developers need to watch every penny. Therefore, good market research and community engagement often doesn’t happen.
’Though co-creation might operate within individual projects, I think the real opportunity lies in communicating and shaping those strategic policies and local plans with communities.’

DB Architects also have a role to play in pushing for co-creation to happen more often. Frequently, we assume a role as mediators between client and community—often by default, and almost by accident. Instead, we should be facilitating a proper co-creation process. We need to be more vocal, to be advocates—not just mediators—pushing for better, earlier co-creation to happen.

ME The relationship between architect and developer is often a dysfunctional one. Property developers are appallingly bad at writing briefs, and architects are appallingly bad at asking for good briefs. That comes from a lack of understanding on both sides, and ultimately the dysfunction at the briefing stage can play itself out through the entirety of a project.

I am frustrated by having to referee meetings between architects and developers when there isn’t enough common language to solve difficult problems—which increasingly are not related to the physical buildings or the design of those buildings, but instead the wider community or the political context.

A developer should be asking the architect: How are you going to help me deal with Boris, Brexit, the GLA and local politics? How, architect, are you helping me in this difficult financial market? How are you helping me de-risk the scheme for when it gets to market in three years? How are you helping me make the scheme as flexible as possible? The world is on fire, so how are you helping me deal with that?

DB The skills you learn as an architect are creativity and problem solving—to mediate between conflicting requirements and synthesize disparate elements. While these skills help to design buildings as objects, they also offer the ability to build consensus and find win-win scenarios that secure benefits, or, indeed, make things happen in the first place!

When this comes to fruition it’s very powerful. At our Camden Courtyard project we were able to strike a balance between commercial drivers and local stakeholder requirements, making a scheme viable without overdeveloping the site. Deploying courtyard models redolent of Berlin, for example, we had to be quite agile to adapt to a London context and to demonstrate the benefits of this style over prevailing residential typologies.

The initial diagram was driven by central spaces that create tranquility and intimacy, while offering relief from a busy urban location. This allowed the scheme to achieve very high density without exceeding seven storeys; compact courtyards bring together private and affordable tenures; plans are optimised and efficient without compromising quality or value; and shared amenity spaces, daylight and views capitalise on the site’s potential.

JS We have discussed the relationship between community and developer and architect and developer. What about the role of politics and planning policies in helping to improve the co-creation process?

DB I often get the sense that communities assume the architect has much more autonomy than is the case, having carte blanche to determine density or type of development. In fact, architects work within tight constraints and planning policies, such as those in the London Plan. Many people are not aware of those policies or their reasoning, which can make architects’ designs seem arbitrary or unjustified—no wonder there’s a loss of trust.

Though co-creation might operate within individual projects, I think the real opportunity lies in communicating and shaping those strategic policies and local plans with communities. I think if we can create more understanding—of the role of the architects, developers, policy, and community knowledge—there’s a chance to build real consensus and collective ambition.

ME Absolutely. In New York their planning process is very different. They have a very sophisticated form of neighbourhood plan, where each of the communities contributes to the overall zoning planning policy framework, and all of the developments are then working to a set of principles that have been developed with the community.

‘Instead the conversation between each of these parties should be: How do we work together to make a better place?’

ME Yes, that’s similar to Germany for example, where plot ratios are clearly determined and fairly inflexible. In contrast, the UK planning system is an arcane, complex process; however, the inherent ambiguity does create flexibility for creativity and innovation, so ‘maverick’ schemes can get through—such as Roger’s Lloyds building or Amin Taha’s 15 Clerkenwell Close. There have been persistent calls to reform the planning system; maybe architects should be more proactive—more ‘upstream’ and involved in shaping policy and communicating a positive vision of how things might be to wider audience, while working on a mission to help the community to find a sustainable future—with better retail provision, better education, better housing, better infrastructure—and all of that becomes the brief for a project. That, for me, is where co-creation starts: a common purpose that everyone works towards.

JS Is that common purpose between developer and architect often found?

ME The relationship between architect and developer is too often a dysfunctional one. Property developers are appallingly bad at writing briefs, and architects are appallingly bad at asking for good briefs. That comes from a lack of understanding on both sides, and ultimately the dysfunction at the briefing stage can play itself out through the entirety of a project.

I am frustrated by having to referee meetings between architects and developers when there isn’t enough common language to solve difficult problems—which increasingly are not related to the physical buildings or the design of those buildings, but instead the wider community or the political context.

A developer should be asking the architect: How are you going to help me deal with Boris, Brexit, the GLA and local politics? How, architect, are you helping me in this difficult financial market? How are you helping me to improve the co-creation process?
Martyn Evans and Dan Burr discuss how the development industry can work to build trust with the communities they impact through co-creation processes.

Early sketches of Chrisp Street, used to work through massing and resolve the often incompatible requirements of stakeholders.

more ‘downstream’ would enable understanding of a locality at a more granular level, resulting in better design solutions.

It also comes down to education—the built environment hardly features on the curriculum, yet the future of cities and urban responses to climate change are key issues of our time. Engaging with young people can help to build that understanding, and I’ve been struck by their passion as well as their willingness to participate and articulate their ideas. Giving more people the tools to engage will deliver benefits in the long run.

ME The biggest problem I see at the moment is that the development process is too combative between the different parts, which stifles the ambition for co-creation. Developers see the architect as another line in the professional services spreadsheet, and the architect sees the developer as just trying to value engineer out all of their creative ideas. The relationship between the community and developers is naturally one of distrust. The developer-local authority relationship is combative, and it starts by sitting across the table fighting it out over affordable housing. Instead the conversation between each of these parties should be: How do we work together to make a better place?
Facilitating Trust: Voices from the Built Environment

Regeneration is thought of as a toxic word for some communities, where it has felt as if development has been done to them, rather than with them, often resulting in an ‘us and them’ dynamic. In order to move past this, and to effectively co-create, it is vital that trust be cultivated between built environment professions—including developers, architects, planners and more—and the communities they impact.

We asked a cross-section of voices from the built environment to weigh in on the issue, with their responses offering a snapshot into the range of approaches employed to create places that truly meet the needs of end users.
How can the built environment professions build trust with the communities they impact?

Peter Murray
Curator in Chief, New London Architecture & Mayor of London’s Design Advocate

How can built environment professionals build trust with the communities they impact? By better communication. The language professionals use and the images they present must be understandable by those outside the bubble—by those who have not spent years of training, and their working lives, using tools that were designed to exchange information between similarly experienced peers. Jargon—words, phrases, acronyms—all used so freely between planners, architects and developers mean less, or mean different things, to a general audience. Professional shorthand has no place in public discussion.

Today we can do better; environmental professionals have so many more tools at their disposal with 3D digital imagery and data analysis. Used responsibly, these can deliver a level of understanding previously difficult and time-consuming to achieve. New technology not only can provide visual understanding of proposals, but it can explain the impact of scale, wind, shade and movement patterns. Communication is intended to generate a common understanding, used to inspire audiences to support innovation and positive change. Used with—often unintended—professional arrogance it divides communities and feeds distrust.

Kate Ives
Development Director, Wates Residential

There is a fascinating Ted Talk about a design challenge called ‘Build a Tower, Build a Team’ by Peter Skillman. In short, it shows that primary school children are often better at creating innovative solutions to design challenges than experts. It’s because of their creative freedom. They don’t have boundaries and only see the challenge. They also don’t see each other as competition or carry ego, instead looking to the solution with togetherness, creativity and a sense of fun.

Why then are we so scared of asking local people to pick up a pencil and draw urban regeneration solutions? Why do we think, as housing practitioners, that we have all the answers? The industry and politicians alike have struggled with the concept of community-led development because they haven’t given enough trust. Trust is hard. It must often be earned, rather than lost, and can be fragile.

Trust is the only way we can deliver the homes we need for ourselves, our parents, our children and our friends. We are in this together, standing alongside local people. This is a shared challenge and, as housing practitioners we are the vehicle through which the process is delivered—we are not the solution. The solution is often complex and multi-faceted, so we need all hands on deck to find it!

Home is the cornerstone of health, education, safety, family life and happiness, and co-creation will unlock opportunity for us all. To achieve this, we all need to trust each other.

To receive trust, all you have to do is give it. Unequivocally.

Trusting
In order to build trust with communities, we must first interrogate what we mean by ‘community.’ When seeking to ‘build community’ during urban regeneration, it is assumed that localities generate patterns of connections. But rather than people being connected by where they live, the reality is that connections are also generated by shared interest. To build community we must endeavour to design projects that drive more productive ways of life, based on collective formations — be it sport, new forms of home schooling, or craft — that create the opportunities to bring difference together.

Part of bringing difference together means embracing conflict. We can’t shy away from — or immediately be put up in arms by — disagreement; instead we must recognize that’s it’s a necessary element of honest dialogue. We must embrace difficulty and be reminded that it’s okay to argue — this is how we learn what really matters and why. Rather than assuming underlying consensus, we must find points of agreement, based in disagreement, to build trust that is less superficial.

Honest dialogue forms a basis for understanding one another. The polarising ‘us and them’ dynamic between communities and designers should be contested, replaced with the understanding that ‘we are them.’ The human element is so often lost — communities and designers alike would benefit from remembering that we are not different: we all seek healthy, happy living environments that enable us to thrive.

At the same time, architects and designers must get out of our comfort zones, and work to really understand the experiences of those in the communities for whom we designing. I have gone through the lengths to achieve this, in the past even moving to the neighbourhood I was working to regenerate — to go beyond simply seeing myself in others’ shoes, but to live as a resident. We must also trust that locals have strong embedded knowledge, based in lived realities.

This should not, however, detract from the expertise of architects and designers. While communities may have a vision for what they want from their neighbourhoods, architects have the skills to negotiate and achieve certain outcomes, while also keeping in mind the larger public interest and longer-term vision. Architects also must impart an understanding that not everything desired will be achieved — there will always be trade-offs.

The underlying element in all of this is communication — a kind that is based in listening, not talking. As architects we are so used to being the presenters, but we need to find better ways of facilitate active listening and encourage understanding, to help us build trust, and ultimately build community.

How can the built environment professions build trust with the communities they impact?

Anna Shapiro
Associate Partner, Sheppard Robson

Anna Shapiro’s painting of skateboarders at Clapham Common speaks to the idea that communities are based on more than shared localities, rather connections are generated by shared interest, collective endeavour, and honest conversation. ‘Skateboarders carving new uses out of gritty streets’ are an example of the ‘true co-creation of the city, where places, designs and people all come together,’ explains Iain Borden.
How can the built environment professions build trust with the communities they impact?

Bridget Ackeifi
Manager, Social Services and Sustainability, Bloomberg Associates

Over the past decade, the built environment professions have attributed value to community input and engagement without devoting sufficient time to scrutinize the actual efficacy of the process. We have adopted a scientific approach, starting with a hypothesis that affords only slight variances in methodology. Too often, this leads to superficial relationships with the communities we impact, frequently amounting to little more than a box-ticking exercise. If we continue to see communities as objects to be impacted with assumptions we aim to prove, we prevent ourselves from being alive to variances or change. To build a relationship rooted in trust, we need to approach engagement less as a scientific process and more as a reciprocal art.

Trust between professionals and communities leads to more abundant, accurate and honest data; an open dialogue between stakeholders and professionals is imperative in fostering trust. When community engagement is starting with a hypothesis that have adopted a scientific approach, actual efficacy of the process. We attributed value to community input and engagement without devoting sufficient time to scrutinize the actual efficacy of the process. We have adopted a scientific approach, starting with a hypothesis that affords only slight variances in methodology. Too often, this leads to superficial relationships with the communities we impact, frequently amounting to little more than a box-ticking exercise. If we continue to see communities as objects to be impacted with assumptions we aim to prove, we prevent ourselves from being alive to variances or change. To build a relationship rooted in trust, we need to approach engagement less as a scientific process and more as a reciprocal art.

That feedback comes through constant resident surveys, but increasingly we are using technology for real-time data; we know more now about what's happening in our buildings and communities. For us that is about receiving continuous feedback from our residents and indeed from our front-line teams, such as those undertaking repairs and maintenance, so we can drive positive changes based on careful listening and conviction.

As long-term investors and operators of thousands of homes for rent in big city neighbourhoods, Get Living are always mindful of the need to provide great experiences through high quality homes, amenities, public realm, sense of neighbourhood and community, backed up by exemplary service. Anything less and our residents can simply serve notice to break their lease and defect.

This puts a healthy pressure on us and others in the ‘build to rent’ sector, to ensure that the designs of our homes, the buildings and landscaped spaces resonate with our residents’ preferences and lifestyles. For us that is about receiving continuous feedback from our residents and indeed from our front-line teams, such as those undertaking repairs and maintenance, so we can drive positive changes based on careful listening and conviction.

That feedback comes through constant resident surveys, but increasingly we are using technology for real-time data; we know more now about what’s happening in our buildings and communities. For us that is about receiving continuous feedback from our residents and indeed from our front-line teams, such as those undertaking repairs and maintenance, so we can drive positive changes based on careful listening and conviction.

Real estate in all sectors, but especially within the residential rental sector, requires an operational platform above the ownership, if it is to financially perform for investors. In a world where demands of occupiers are ever increasing and the choice widening, the delivery of service, flexibility and experience defines the winners from the rest. Inherent in that is the need to build a reputation, a relationship and a brand with the communities we impact based on genuine trust.
Trust—as noted by Argent Related’s Tom Goodall—is ‘hard earned and easily lost.’ Here, the process of building trust is imagined by Cheryl Taylor as a journey through an urban landscape, which the urban development professions must navigate to reach the end goal, reinterpreting Sherry Arnstein’s pivotal ladder as a ‘Landscape of Citizen Participation.’
How can the built environment professions build trust with the communities they impact?

Crowdfunding—lots of people giving small amounts of money—isn’t a new idea. In fact, back in the 1800s the base of the Statue of Liberty was crowdfunded through public subscription. Fast forward to present day, and using crowdfunding to generate public support for an idea has become a mainstream concept, mainly because of the development of technology and specialist crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter and Spacehive. A ‘Kickstarter’ is now so ubiquitous it is a verb.

Crowdfunding should not replace funding for public services. But ideas like the Camden Highline—a proposed public park and garden walk transforming a disused railway between Camden Town and King’s Cross—often fall outside the scope of the public sector’s imagination and ability. This is the gap that crowdfunding can fill, whether that is funding, support or the expertise to make a project happen.

Along with raising funds for an idea, a successful crowdfunding campaign can test support for a project at an early stage (fail early and fail cheaply, right? And hopefully before any public money is used)! Crowdfunding, in our experience, is not a shortcut to success, but it does provide impetus and speeds up the less sexy, but no less important activities that contribute to a project’s success. It can raise the profile of a project and demands you involve new audiences.

It can also unlock match funding and support. The Camden Highline’s crowdfunding campaign has benefitted from the support of 1,000+ backers, it has been adopted as Council policy and has unlocked funding from the Mayor of London.

In our experience everyone who donates to the project isn’t just a funder. They’re potentially a collaborator, a volunteer, a source of ideas, a gateway to a new network of people, and a future user. They’re invested in the neighbourhood’s success, and can be called upon to help the project. Crowdfunding acts as a catalyst for reimagining what is possible and enables communities to come together to fund and deliver a project, ultimately giving them a sense of control or ownership of their neighbourhood’s destiny and helping to bridge the gap between communities and designers.

Good place-making is easier achieved when beautiful architecture, streets and landscape proposals are routed and matured in the rich atmosphere of understanding a place, its histories and local people’s ambitions.

The time and agency required to build and maintain the necessary relationships to achieve this are sometimes hard to come by and need to begin at the start of design process. This sort of approach is rarely requested in client briefs and is constantly threatened by the grind of the day-to-day in fast-paced delivery programmes. Unfortunately, our planning regulations do not ask for such an approach either.

This inquisitive approach widens the nature and scope of design work, often perceived perhaps as ‘loss of control’ by the commissioning entity and/or the design team. Further, it does not work well if not checked and openly discussed through the lens of financial and delivery implications.

We have found that collective 3D model building (to scale) with a mix of local and technical stakeholders can be a particularly effective way to explore possible design solutions, while facilitating a genuine creative dialogue. Key financial facts and broad-brush cost implications of design ideas are woven into this approach, cultivating a drive for impact inspired by good practice.

This rapid prototyping of built form, street and landscape proposals is regularly embedded in a programme of exploratory meetings with local stakeholders and followed up by more traditional exhibition-style events, fully integrated in the work stage sign-off progression of a planning application. This, if done well, facilitates more mature conversations between all parties involved and recognises local people as part of the wider client team.

We need an inclusive approach; for example, how can an innovation campus democratise its offering to promote delivery of next generation products and services in a manner relevant to all citizens? The approach needs to foreground what goes on in and around buildings; spaces need to be porous—not creating artificial boundaries that exclude. Connections through physical and virtual infrastructure need to work together, to reach out and provide opportunities for all. In doing so we democratising opportunities—inspiring and empowering innately digital teenagers and reskilling other generations—and provide a reason for engagement by all.

By prioritising inclusivity and approaching physical assets in terms of what needs to happen in and around them—accounting for diversity in all its aspects—the built environment can promote relevance and make a positive impact, securing trust.
Architects seem to have a shifting relationship with how to approach the communities they impact. In part, that’s witnessed by the rapidly evolving language that we use to describe the process of involving non-professional stakeholders in the design process. From consultation to engagement, on to participation and collaboration, then to co-design and co-creation... I’m sure there will be more ‘must use’ terminology next year.

It seems to me that underneath this superficial churn, not much is changing. True ‘co-creation’ is still a rare process. I see the need for a system of commissioning architecture that both requires and supports architects to engage in a genuine, long-term way with those groups that are affected by their work. This is not easy, and cannot be paid lip-service to. We need to use mixed techniques to reach wide audiences, as well as establish smaller groups for focused conversations about the details of a given scheme. We need to recognise that this process holds important design value by helping to make schemes better informed and more responsive. Above all, as a profession we need to practice and we’ll get better at it: better at communicating, better at responding to challenges, better at explaining ourselves and better at listening. Only that way will we be able to build trust with those who are affected by our work.

—Kate Ives, Development Director, Wates Residential
Communicating

Effective and accessible communication is key to co-creation. Beyond the standard architectural toolkit, communication devices such as fiction, technology and new photographic styles can enhance the co-creation engagement process to improve understanding between designers and end users.
Communication is a vital element of the co-creation process. In order for communities to weigh in on potential changes to their neighbourhoods, they must first understand what has or has not been proposed. This requires going beyond conventional engagement strategies—primarily supplying CGI renderings or technical documents—to promote genuine understanding. What tools and techniques then, can we use to promote communication between designers and communities? Rory Olcayto explores the role of fiction as a communication device during the co-creation process, drawing on ‘Brent Cross South: The Handbook’ as an example of how narrative can be used to envision future places and the people that will inhabit them.

Fiction as an Urban Design Tool

Rory Olcayto is a Writer and Critic and the former Chief Executive of Open City.

What if we used fiction to build our towns and cities? What if design and access statements—the front end of every planning app—were more like short stories? What if, instead of having a section in your development document referring to policy D4 of the London Plan, and relying on terms like ‘outdoor amenity space,’ you came across a passage like this:

In the evening, my Mum and I will go up onto the roof terrace at the top of our building to watch the sunset. It’s amazing because the whole city is spread out in front of you like a giant picnic. If it’s clear, we’ll be able to see Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament which is my Mum’s favourite building. That’s why she gave me my name.

‘You’re my little Ben,’ she says.

That’s a whole lot of what ifs, some more fanciful than others. Yet one thing links them: they’re not actually what ifs at all. In fact, they’ve all been ‘done’, more or less, by Argent Related, the fruits of which—including Little Ben by Elizabeth Day, an excerpt of which appears above—can be found in Brent Cross South: The Handbook.

The handbook, a bold experiment using fiction as an urban design tool, was conceived and produced by Open City and Beispiel for the team forging the vast (180-acre) mixed-use neighbourhood on the fringes of the English capital. It sets out five citymaking principles for the new town project, each backed up by a 600-word short story. The handbook also deploys pop-art ‘posters’ and colourful collages depicting architectural and urban situations, which together reinforce the principles of this groundbreaking manifesto.

Consider the Little Ben excerpt: It describes a real home, a housing block with an apartment, accommodating a little boy and his mum, with rooftop views for miles around. It conveys a sense of place, a local neighbourhood, but in global city too, with world-famous landmarks. The details linger in your mind. Could it be that encoding hard facts into short stories really makes the information more memorable?

In 'Essentially Green,' illustrated by Filippa Hellsten, shows the vision for two landmark parks, complimented by a series of gardens, squares and incidental spaces in which to stroll, play and relax in Brent Cross South.
‘From the Ground Up: The Right Infrastructure in Place Early’ is one of five key principles outlined in Brent Cross South: The Handbook, envisaged here by Tishk Barzanji as essential public transport and pedestrian infrastructure which empowers people to live as they choose.
Using fiction in this way has been done before—Renault commissioned French artist Moebius to create a comic book story for internal use way back in the ’60s—but Argent Related’s bold approach is noteworthy in the context of London’s property sector today. Though ostensibly a guidance document championing sound town planning, the handbook is also an illustrated short story collection by the best of London’s diverse writing and artistic talent.

Alongside Sunday Times bestseller Elizabeth Day, you’ll find Booker-longlisted Guy Gunaratne, Will Wiles (‘a British Kafka,’ says David Baddiel), Venice Biennale artist Marie Jacotey, and Kayo Chingonyi, last year’s recipient of the Dylan Thomas Award. These expert storytellers render skew-whiff perspectives that inspire and destabilise simultaneously, a tension perfectly captured in Will Wiles sci-fi short, Save Brent Cross. It describes campaigners attending a public meeting sometimes in the 2080s, protesting against the demolition of the now 60-year old Argent Related scheme. As well as making a powerful point to the present development team—you’re building tomorrow’s heritage architecture—it contains powerful visions, like the passage below, of how London might be in the decades to come:

Above, the Brent droneport was as busy as ever, shuttling packages and takeaways across northwest London. Beneath however was quiet. Tens of thousands of cyclists used the North Circular every day, but the cracked, ancient road was so wide it never appeared truly busy.

In Song Lines, Guy Gunaratne—remarkably, a local boy who grew up in Brent Cross—picks out the Babel-talk of London’s mixed communities and considers how it might give shape to the emerging townscape:

A song of following footsteps and family and that. But still here. Still here, still singing. That’s what it sounds like. Sounds like circles. Circle inside circles. Like if you put this place in a bubble. And you shook it. And you held it up to your ear. It would sound like a new hymn.

Kayo Chingonye’s poetry and Marie Jacotey’s ‘comic’ are equally effective, relying more on precision and abstract imagery to build a powerful vision of place. Kayo’s poetry also flirts with dream logic, but there’s forecasting there, too, with visions of how technology might shape the urban design:

And all this took shape as an act of imagination, so now a line of graphite in a sketch pad is transformed such that here out of North London’s skyline structures rise like the stems of plants turning to face the light so when the light breaks cloud it catches and makes this place precious as true attention always does.

But you might wonder: Why bother? You’re building cities, not vying for the Booker. In truth, the stories are just one of the means to deliver on a three-fold plan: First, to forge an empathetic, people-centred, citymaking culture among the multi-disciplined Argent Related team; second, to soften the hard logic and ‘ultra-practicality’ of development (the number-crunching, the permissions, the planning); and third, to seed a new approach to—and relationship with—writing (something citymakers of all kinds, including architects, planners, and developers, actually have to do quite a lot). Of course, public consultation has a key role to play as this ‘new town’ project takes shape. How real people view construction industry plans matters above all. However, dramatising the lives of fictional residents has proven useful in other ways. The process encouraged the Brent Cross South team to forge their own new perspectives on how to make a real place. It built empathy. The very act of handing over one’s own work to fellow professionals—the handbook’s novelists and artists—seemingly unencumbered by the pressures of property development, allowed them to make room for alternative, non-industry, ideas. These in turn cast their citymaking challenge in a new light. Long term development of this kind needs this kind of texture, this kind of thinking—the kind of thinking, in other words, you don’t often find expressed as a list of bullet points. Or as one of the campaigners in Will Wiles Save Brent Cross notes: “...when a place works, even its flaws fit in. You can’t masterplan the weird—I don’t think you can.”

Brent Cross South: the handbook was created by Rory Olcayto (Open City) and Sven Mündner (Beispiel) for Argent Related’s Nick Searl.

Marie’s story trips along like a daydream; we feel the narrator’s excitement as she remembers how the neighbourhood in which she lives with her young family emerged—‘THE BOOKSHOP!’—around her over time. Kayo’s poetry also flirts with dream logic, but there’s forecasting there, too, with visions of how technology might shape the urban design:

A Welcoming Space for Everyone, visualizes the breadth of options for new spaces, activities and opportunities created by the development of Brent Cross South, such as a safe, diverse street where everyone belongs, as illustrated by Filippa Hellsten. 

“The Bookshop!”

A Welcoming Space for Everyone, visualizes the breadth of options for new spaces, activities and opportunities created by the development of Brent Cross South, such as a safe, diverse street where everyone belongs, as illustrated by Filippa Hellsten.
Envisioning Empathy

Alan Bainbridge is the Director of Workplace and Corporate Real Estate at the BBC.

Unique manifestations on glazed walls and windows—such as this pattern inspired by the waves of the sea—act as wayfinding devices at BBC Cymru Wales, helping employees easily navigate through the workplace. The manifestations were developed as part of a student design competition and in consultation with neurodiversity experts. The manifestation pictured here was inspired by the pattern developed by Philippa Rose Harvey from Swansea College of Art.

The definition of inclusion is often focused on removing physical barriers that make buildings and spaces accessible to as broad a range of people as possible. While this is obviously vital to boosting diversity and creating spaces that are fair, we also need to ensure that our buildings are sensitive to mental health and neurodiversity.

‘It is the job of forward-thinking designers and occupiers to redefine the definition of inclusivity, broadening its scope whilst not impacting the vitality of the interior designs.’

With the wellbeing of people in the workplace now higher on the agenda than ever before, occupiers and designers are increasingly scrutinising how spaces can promote neurological diversity. There are many people for whom the modern workplace is a challenging environment; the bustle and activity of open floorplates—whilst great for fostering collaboration—can be a significant hindrance to those suffering with autism, as well as other neurological and mental health conditions, which in some instances, make it virtually impossible to work in a conventional office environment.

It is the job of forward-thinking designers and occupiers to redefine inclusivity, broadening its scope whilst not impacting the vitality of the interior designs. By utilising co-creation principles, we can push inclusivity further, using novel tools to promote communication and empathy between user groups and designers.

Our ongoing project at BBC Cymru Wales is an interesting case in point: it is a space for broadcasting, with many screens and an open-plan, energetic atmosphere. We wanted to design the Welsh headquarters to be sensitive to neurodiversity issues, without sacrificing exciting and engaging design. Colour, pattern and energy are a key part of BBC Cymru Wales’s design, but they are incorporated mindfully of how a greater range of people experience spaces.

To achieve this, from the outset of the project, ID:SR Sheppard Robson and BBC Workplace worked with groups of end users, with experts, and with Virtual Reality (VR) technology to build a deep understanding of the needs of BBC Cymru Wales’ employees, with a focus on inclusivity. This approach moved beyond typical engagement and communication strategies, harnessing technology to shape a design process that put ourselves in the shoes of others. cont. →
An array of workspaces—from small and intimate to large and civic—offers a variety of choice to support numerous activities and working styles. The design of these work settings was driven by empirical data and engagement with staff. A variety of work settings include quiet booths and intimate zones away from the desk areas, allowing for focused work and a place for anyone with neurodiverse conditions to escape the lively bustle of the open-plan environment.
Using VR headsets, the ID:SR and BBC Workplace teams were able to replicate how neurodiverse employees experience the workplace. This bewildering and uncomfortable experience illustrated just how disruptive specific design features could be. To help deconstruct our experiences with the VR headsets, we worked with neurodiversity expert Jean Hewitt, to analyse which design features caused uncomfortable experiences, which features offered calm and respite, and why each feature elicited its respective response.

This exercise enabled communication further than simply telling and listening—offering experiential understanding beyond what the standard tools engagement tools typically afford—and actively shaped the design of the internal spaces. Tonal textures and subtle colour changes of carpets aid in wayfinding, horizontally defining work zones, circulation and collaboration areas. This is reinforced by landmark blocks of colour to indicate floor level, and a colourful spectrum of light boxes animates the atrium elevation, linking the floorplates vertically.

Quiet and calm spaces are found throughout the floorplates and used for focussed work, allowing people to get away from the noise and hubbub of an open-plan environment. Within the variety of spaces, lighting is carefully considered: non-flickering LED lamps and a drop in lighting levels, when compared to BCO standards, evoke a more comfortable, domestic feel to the spaces, whilst dimmable lights within the quiet booths can cater for personal preferences and disabilities.

When discussing workplaces, we often talk about the team dynamics, underpinned by principles of collaboration, sharing and interaction. Beyond this, teams creating workplaces also have a responsibility to the individual and how they interact with the spaces. For example, if you take a prospective recruit with an anxiety or a neurological-related condition, the often intensely social atmosphere of an office may be overwhelming, potentially making working in a conventional workplace unfeasible.

Instead, imagine that same individual with an alternative way of experiencing the office: with calmer routes through the floorplates to give people a choice of how they move around the buildings, and quiet zones where they can work in total silence. This consideration, alongside informed designed decisions, has the power to unlock a huge amount of potential.

'If communities could virtually experience proposed designs during consolidations, perhaps we could increase understanding between architects and communities, building more empathy and trust during the development process.'

Workplace design has already acknowledged that one size does not fit all. An increasing range of spaces allows people to choose where and how they work, creating a genuine choice between the bustle of open-plan working and calmer spaces to focus and decompress. Surely, with choice and variety already high on the agenda, this is an opportune moment to drive significant social change through thoughtful and high-quality design, enabling even more people to thrive within an office environment.

This exercise also highlights the potential of VR for pushing communication further during the engagement process. While at BBC Cymru Wales this technology enabled better understanding for designers, the roles can be reversed, allowing end users to have a more experiential understanding of proposed designs. If communities could virtually experience proposed designs during consolidations, perhaps we could increase understanding between architects and communities, building more empathy and trust during the development process.

‘By utilising co-creation principles, we can push inclusivity further, using novel tools to promote communication, empathy, and experiential understanding between user groups and designers.’

— Alan Bainbridge, Director of Workplace, BBC
Photography is a key instrument in the architect’s marketing toolkit, in which physical spaces and materials take centre stage; but it’s the people — how they adopt, adapt and make spaces their own — that make a building come to life. Roman Koester inverts the traditional architectural photograph to foreground the people who inhabit these spaces, capturing the lived realities that transpire within.
The public piazza at 245 Hammersmith Road becomes an impromptu backdrop for a passing photography class.
A model for a photography class poses on the flexible outdoor seating in the 245 Hammersmith Road piazza. The new public space hosts a wide variety of planned events—including food trucks, outdoor films, and music—as well as serendipitous activities, such as photo shoots.
A roaster tests for tasting notes of a new coffee at Monmouth Coffee Company; the ethically sourced coffees change seasonally depending on availability. The company’s roastery is housed in five converted rail arches in Bermondsey, South London. The arches allow for functional zones, separating quieter office space from production areas, where around five tonnes of coffee are produced each week.

Flame symbols emblazon a roaster’s hands when reflected in the Loring coffee roasters at Monmouth Coffee Company’s roastery.
A pedestrian applies makeup while passing down a London street, using a building’s window as a mirror.
The reaction to a presentation in a new theatre at the Sammy Ofer Centre of the London Business School.

An audience member records a live gig on her mobile phone, embodying the increasingly digital experience of space.
Local residents use the cluster of facilities in Hounslow House. The new borough headquarters combines public amenities—including a library, adult learning classrooms, and a café—with council services and chambers. The co-location of services has helped develop a deeper connection between the council and the citizens they serve.
Hounslow Council employees take in the view from the borough civic centre. The building’s external envelope features distinctive geometric forms, which self-shade the building whilst also framing views of Hounslow.

Council employees working in their flexible office space. Employee wellbeing was paramount in the new council office, with plentiful natural light, roof terraces, and social spaces integrated with the public to create a collaborative, relaxed atmosphere.
Empowering

Listening, trust and communication are the fundamentals that enable people and communities to feel empowered to participate in the co-creation process. By empowering communities to contribute to designs, architects can help to impart a sense of collective ownership over the finished product, and ultimately create more effective buildings and places.
Often the dominant narrative of youth in the context of regeneration depicts young people not as stakeholders, but as a nuisance, or even a security risk. At Manchester’s Contact Theatre, that idea is contested, with youth voices considered paramount in the re-design of the iconic theatre. Matt Fenton, Jake Howarth, and Jasmin Eastwood discuss the role of youth governance and co-creation in the theatre’s redevelopment, exploring how Contact applied processes of youth governance through its consultant group, Con:Struct to ensure that the designs reflect the needs of its members, staff and audience.
Empowering for the theatre redevelopment?

How did Contact use its experience with youth governance to facilitate a process of co-creation for the theatre redevelopment?

The most important thing to understand is that Contact has been informed by 20 years of youth governance, with young people under the age of 25 comprising 50% of the board of trustees, and we try to apply that 50% methodology to everything we do, including the capital redevelopment.

To decide on what the building should contain, we determined that continuous consultations with participants and staff—seeing the early design, and inputting ideas in that setting—that I then got involved in Con:Struct, which consists of a dedicated group of young people chosen from our participation programme to see the project through to completion, of which Jake is a member.

Previous to the capital build project, I was a part of Contact theatre, and because of my love for the organisation, I wanted to get involved further with the build project. I was a part of Contact theatre, because of my love for the organisation, I wanted to get involved further with the project. It was from the very early consultation with participants and staff—seeing the early design, and inputting ideas in that setting—that I then got involved in Con:Struct.

What was really exciting was that the first iteration of Con:Struct was part of the interview process for the design team. They had a significant presence and helped us come up with the interview questions—with particular interest in how the design team might create opportunities and listen to young people and their comfort level with a design process largely driven by young people—which were slightly different than what the board would have asked.

The interview was not typical—there were so many people, including the young person panel, and a whole cross section of the theatre. Usually in an interview you might just meet the chief executive, so you don’t actually get any of the end users, and the criteria they’re potentially appointing you on aren’t necessarily things that end users will look for in the building.

It’s also important to understand that we haven’t just chased a young person down the street or asked the audience what they want—Con:Struct is made up of people who are truly embedded in the theatre and its processes, with a thorough understanding and love for Contact.

I was involved with the interior design team—looking at the lighting, colours of the walls, finishes, signage, accessibility—and I was surprised at how much involvement in decision making and idea generation I actually had. If we hadn’t been part of the process, I would be worried going back into the building; but because I’ve been part of it, I know everyone will be really happy with how it’s turned out.

In the instance of the interior design, where conflict was creating an impasse, Contact took the decision to give that to Con:Struct to develop. I was stuck by Con:Struct’s willingness to get stuck into the project and make hard decisions—often that the capital team would struggle with due to conflicting opinions. When we were at times losing the big picture, Con:Struct were very good at honing it back to the basics of what we were trying to achieve.

How did you decide on what elements for the redesign should be prioritised?

There was a need for significant value engineering to meet the budget, and some things came out because they didn’t meet the financial viability test. In early consultations, we established four main principles, which then become the DNA for the project, and we could refer to when deciding what elements to retain and what could be removed.

That list of aspirations was one of the most useful tools we created over the project, to constantly reinforce and revisit. Having those as the benchmark of the project made sure we stayed true to those key visions and project aims—sustainability, access, improving business models, and creating the theatre with visibility of staff—throughout the challenges that arose during the project.

For example, during the process we found that the lift wasn’t in a good position for wheelchair users and that we needed to move it. We were able to iron-out this sort of issue beforehand, so they didn’t need to be fixed in the future. Sometimes you go into a new building and there are so many user issues that weren’t considered during design.

Though during value engineering, a cost consultant might say the lift relocation would be easy to remove from the re-design, Con:Struct were quite adamant to keep it because access was a key aspiration.

Early consultations with Con:Struct established four key design principles which became driving values for the project, such as ‘Environmental Sustainability,’ which necessitated the design retain key features and adopt natural ventilation systems, including the distinctive chimneys from Alan Short’s 1990’s design.
Improving access was a key aspiration of Con:Struct. Early analysis revealed that the location of the lift hindered access for those with mobility issues, necessitating it be moved; without the input and advocacy of Con:Struct, the lift move could have easily been value-engineered out of the redesign.

A flexible rehearsal room offers space for Contact to practice through a ‘devised theatre model,’ which parallels the co-creation process, as a collaborative effort in which a group of actors collectively develop a theatre piece.
Having a voice that actually represents the core group of end users was key, and I think it would have been good to have brought Con:Struct in earlier in the process, to realise how valuable their contribution could have been to resolving some of our earlier discussions.

**JE** I also think that Con:Struct's understanding of the practicalities of the project was underestimated, as was how much they would want to be involved. It's quite a commitment turning up after a full day of work, traveling quite far to meet, to give input and contribute to the design, for a that process went on for months. Did you find it difficult to be a part of the design process for such a sustained amount of time, and did you feel accommodated by the process?

"I think it's quite naïve of us as designers—regularly running consultation processes—to think that's the most effective way to get feedback from people. In that situation, only the person who speaks the loudest will be heard." **JE**

**JH** At the time, I was commuting from Manchester to Wigan every day and back, but if you care enough about a project it’s about prioritisation. I do feel I was accommodated, but for other people it may have been more difficult. However, with the right engagement with the community, I think you’d always get people who are willing to get involved with this sort of process.

**MF** In retrospect, I would have created a small budget for the Con:struct team and paid them an honorarium—to cover expense for travel, food, etc—to support them and acknowledged that they are taking the time out to contribute their expertise on the theatre. We were taking their expertise for free and we have to question: was that wrong? Often, we have end user as volunteer—versus a well-paid designer or chief executive—and we need to unpack the power dynamics of co-creation.

**JE** You have the power dynamic of the director of the theatre, the architect, the end users—it's important to make sure everyone feels confident and comfortable in the space to actually give their honest opinions. When you do a big consultation exercise with 100 people in a room, you can't expect people to give their honest opinion—they're

‘I think having end users make key decisions is so valuable. It gave me an ownership of the building—almost like a protector—looking after the space that so many people care about.'

--- Jake Howarth, member of Con:Struct, Contact Theatre
going to be holding something back, wanting to be polite, worried about how they’re going to be perceived. I think it’s quite naïve of us as designers—regularly running consultation processes—to think that’s the most effective way to get feedback from people. In that situation, only the person who speaks the loudest will be heard.

As a member of Con:Struct, did you feel like you were supported to voice your honest ideas and opinions?

JH Having a drama background, I have a lot of confidence, so I felt quite comfortable during the process; but that’s something I think would be key for a different project—making sure people feel comfortable and engaged, and really welcoming people in. Contact is already a safe space where everyone feels comfortable participating.

MF It’s also important to acknowledge that Contact has a 20-year legacy of youth governance, so it’s less of a leap for us to do a project in this way, whereas it might be much more of a leap, challenge, or risk for an organisation that doesn’t already do that.

‘You need to acknowledge that trust might be an issue, build that trust within the group, and make sure that the design team understands those voices need to be valued. Trust is not given, you have to earn it.’ MF

JE I think the challenge for co-creation projects is establishing trust. The young people at Contact do feel like they have a voice—that’s acknowledged every day in the theatre—but I don’t know if you could get that level of commitment elsewhere. What advice would you give for a design team in a different context, in which a high level of trust has not yet been established, to help cultivate engagement?

MF Creating quick win decisions early on allows participants to see that they made a decision and it was acted on—that’s a key part of building trust that you need to do in the early stages. Later on, there will be more difficult situations, where there won’t be agreement. You need to acknowledge that trust might be an issue, build that trust within the group, and make sure that the design team understands those voices need to be valued. Trust is not given, you have to earn it.

It’s also important to genuinely consider who the people are that you need to involve, and how to engage those users from the absolute earliest moment. Schedule consultations on the availability of the participants, meet their needs and consider things like how and where you meet, or childcare. Otherwise they won’t be able to come.

What’s key is that there are end users in the room when conversations are being had, so they are part of the discussions about what can be value engineered—because they have different opinions to what I think, what finance will think—and it’s important to agree as a group of people.

JH I think having end users make key decisions is so valuable. It gave me an ownership of the building—almost like a protector—looking after the space that so many people care about. Architecture defines a city, and if this is the process of co-creation happened more often, it would prevent a lot of problems that inevitably need to be resolved later on.

JE I’ve learned that rather than treating consultation as a hoop to jump through—after which a conventional design approach would resume—the process needs to have the same longevity and endurance as the building project itself, to create places that truly meet the needs of their users. This project has been quite unique in that it’s an opportunity for young people to have a say over the built environment. Young people make up a huge percentage of the population and are major contributors to our cities, but have been largely removed from the decision-making process. The result of this process reinforces the idea that all citizens have a valuable contribution to make, and the consultation process needs to be interrogated and restructured to reflect that.

An early sketch of Contact Theatre’s redesign by Sheppard Robson Partner, James Jones, featuring updated chimneys for natural ventilation.
When time and care is taken to foster engagement in the architectural process, are the resulting spaces better suited for the communities they serve? Nadine Hibbert dissects this query with architects Tom Kyle and Patricia de Isidoro, reflecting on the processes and lessons learned while co-creating an outdoor classroom for the community garden in Brockley, South London.

Here, a facilitated design process for a new classroom actively involved local residents and garden users, not only in the design, but in the making and construction processes as well. Frendsbury Gardens acts as an important precedent for the potential of co-creation as a community building exercise, which could be utilised in large scale regeneration schemes to cultivate a sense of community ownership.
Patricia de Isidoro To start, what is the background of Frendsbury Gardens? How and why was it created?

Nadine Hibbert Frendsbury Gardens was founded in 2008, on a disused piece of council land adjacent the Honor Oak Estate in Lewisham. The site had mostly been used for dumping rubbish, and there were concerns about safety. After clearance, it took a few years to open the garden due to site constraints, and it officially opened in 2011, with the hopes of making the neighbourhood safer, greener and more beautiful.

The site negotiates very different socio-economic contexts, including affluent Telegraph Hill and the Honor Oak Estate, with communities who face multiple types of deprivation. I’ve been amazed watching the garden transform from the original vision—of just wanting to make a safe, green space—into what it’s become, helping to bridge the gap between these communities.

Tom Kyle Have you felt that since the garden has opened, some of the social divide has diminished? How does the garden facilitate this process, and how will the new classroom further this pursuit?

NH It has improved some, but it’s an ongoing process. In 2016, after a local boy was stabbed nearby on his way to the community centre down the road, parents were worried about accessing the garden. After that, we created an afterschool club at the garden with a walking bus, where we walk the kids to and from the garden and the centre. The garden now serves as a safe zone that brings the community together. Ordinarily, people from the conservation areas wouldn’t always mix with families from the council estate, for example.

A wide-cross section of the community uses the garden, which brings people together. Older people or parents in the area—including myself—will bring their kids, walk around and look at the frogs in the pond or just listen to the birds. It’s a convenient resource for a lot of people, rich and poor. People forage berries for their morning muesli; one resident was able to provide fresh, organic vegetables for her kids for an entire summer, which she couldn’t normally afford.

The garden also hosts programming for about five schools—which have garden beds for planting or might do frog life-cycle lessons at the pond—and a Little Explorers outdoor programme. The new classroom will help improve our capacity to provide year-round programming, with shelter from the rain.

TK I take my daughter to the Little Explorers programme, and I was speaking to you [Nadine] one day about the garden, and you mentioned the need for a covered structure for protection from the rain. So, I put some drawings together for a structure, and this project grew from there.

NH We crowd-funded and received grants, with the council matching our contributions, so we also had to meet Section 106 community engagement requirements. This meant the project required community feedback about the classroom, and we spoke to a wide cross-section of people; from local police, to learn what design parameters help prevent anti-social behaviour, to schools and a care home, to make sure that there is accommodation for anyone, from four-year-old kids to the elderly. Even though it’s small build, we consulted a huge amount of people, because the community it serves is massive, with many different sets of needs, which changed the design.

‘If you involve people from the start, then the outcome when its finished means that it doesn’t just meet the needs of 50% of the community—or the initial proposal—but it meets the needs of a much wider range of people.’

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TK We met the Honor Oak Community Centre right at the beginning, with the youth club, for a tile testing session. We took tiles, which were originally random colours, but people didn’t like that, so we adjusted the design. Do you think this user input from the beginning of the process allowed the classroom to better respond to the community’s needs?

NH If you involve people from the start, then the outcome when its finished means that it doesn’t just meet the needs of 50% of the community—or the initial proposal—but it meets the needs of a much wider range of people.

For example, we changed the design where we had initially assumed the classroom would let a bit of water in, as it’s in a garden.

‘If you involve people from the start, then the outcome when its finished means that it doesn’t just meet the needs of 50% of the community—or the initial proposal—but it meets the needs of a much wider range of people.’

—Nadine Hibbert BEM, Chair, Frendsbury Gardens
Locals come together to celebrate the opening of the classroom. The success of this project and its process of co-creation transcends the physical space created, evident in the social connections and sense of ownership cultivated over the classroom, community garden and neighbourhood as a whole.

“All the flowers of tomorrow are in the seeds of today” reads across the newly created classroom at Frendsbury Gardens, in Brockley, South London. The project engaged with an extensive cross-section of the community and has inspired a series of similar projects throughout South London.

The process of tile-making enabled a wide range of people to be involved with the creation of the classroom, allowing individuals to identify their unique contribution to the finished design and imparting a collective sense of ownership over the classroom.
People who use the space for gardening were okay with water dripping, but other sections of community needed total waterproofing; local mums needed a dry place to watch their children, or to breast-feed, to feel quite comfortable to use the space in an intimate way.

TK The original design featured timber shingles, but by including the tiles to make the classroom waterproof, we created an opportunity for an art project with Patricia, which made the project much more of a catalyst for building community. If we had used shingles, the project may have gone much faster, but we would have lost the opportunity for engagement with a wider range of people, and in a way, the project needed to take its time to build trust and to have a bigger impact.

'The process has resulted in the imprint of all the hands that have worked towards this project.' PI

NH It was a very organic way of working—presenting ideas to community, then incorporating their feedback—there is value in the slowness of the process, that allowed a sense of community to be embedded.

TK It also allowed a whole range of people to be involved—teachers, Lewisham College students, local residents, councillors—with a range of activities, but the artwork was really the most inclusive, as it required less skill to participate. While Mace and Ramboll were needed for engineering and health and safety for the timber frame, anyone could participate in the tile making.

NH The process allowed organisations like the Drumbeat School—which serves children with autistic needs—to engage through the tile making, because it was a consistent, repetitive process. These students were able to learn the process, and repeat it with their school, every week, and their parents were overjoyed to know that their children, who might otherwise have a really difficult time contributing productively to society, are now part of something that will last forever and benefit the community. It’s those stories that have kept me going through this process.

PI When you set up a process—a creative process or making process—you don’t know how different groups will react to it. At some point I was worried that groups would get bored making the tiles, because it was quite repetitive, but it was exactly this consistency that appealed to the Drumbeat students. For others, the most engaging part was painting and personalising the tiles. The reactions were completely different, and the process has resulted in the imprint of all the hands that have worked towards this project; people are attached to their work and point out their tiles.

'I think if an architect had designed the classroom in isolation, without this level of engagement, the creative instinct would be to create a much more minimal, perfectly resolved design. However, I don’t think this approach would have given us a classroom that is appropriately rooted within the community.' TK

NH There’s a sense of ownership and community that’s been created through the process. We all know each other and who has worked on this project, which discourages any vandalising and preserves the space. The project has also grown immeasurably, by so many different groups of people who have been connected to it, like tentacles that have spread out into the community.

Now people have an even greater vision, thinking about other gardens, making more classrooms and connecting them. The project is now so much more than the sum of its parts; the impact goes beyond the physical space and is felt in the social connections and positive energy that have been created throughout the process.

TK I think if an architect had designed the classroom in isolation, without this level of engagement, the creative instinct would be to create a much more minimal, perfectly resolved design. However, I don’t think this approach would have given us a classroom that is appropriately rooted within the community. That’s where co-creation—and prioritising community input—has the power to go beyond a physical structure itself, creating space for the stuff of life.
Advocating

Looking forward, what is the role of the architect of the future? By embracing processes of co-creation, architects can work to advocate for more ethical forms of development.
How can all parts of the built environment work collaboratively to ensure that communities are involved in—and benefit from—new development? Sarah Cary discusses with Alan Shingler how her experience in both private and public sectors has shaped her views on co-creation, and how strategic engagement can be harnessed to promote strong development ethics. Sarah explains how early, thoughtful engagement can encourage a shift in attitudes from both social and environmental perspectives, playing a vital role in evolving development processes as issues surrounding climate change become increasingly pertinent.
When it comes to co-creation, it is self-evident that being able to consider a project from as many different perspectives as possible is highly valuable for the professionals involved. The problem is that most people spend their entire careers in one silo or another, be it in the public, private sector or voluntary sector. On that front, Sarah Cary is rather different. Brought up in Dallas, she attended the University of Texas, graduating with the American equivalent of a first in just two and a half years on what is meant to be a four-year programme. A move to the UK to pursue a career in the built environment followed, in addition to further academic studies (she holds a doctorate in addition to being a qualified planner). Then, after a brief career in consultancy, Cary joined British Land in 2008, rising to become Head of Sustainable Places in 2015. Around two years ago, however, her career trajectory took a different direction when she decided to take up the role of Executive Director, Place, at Enfield Council. While the path from public sector planning to private consultancy is well trodden, moving from one of the country’s best respected developers and landlords to a job in local government, however senior, remains highly unusual.

As a result, Cary is better placed than most to comment on how all parts of the built environment need to work collaboratively and across sectors to ensure that communities are involved in—and benefit from—new development. Alan Shingler, Partner at Sheppard Robson, met her to discuss how her diverse experience has shaped her views and how co-creation can lead to better outcomes, both socially and environmentally.

‘...True co-creation will only happen when the communities affected by development are brought on board at as early stage as possible.’

Shingler opened the discussion by asking Cary how she went about embedding sustainability into British Land’s development pipeline and what lessons she had carried over to her work at Enfield. “When I was at British Land, I tried to make sustainability everybody’s job,” she said. “So, having a framework where architects had to think about it, structural engineers had to think about it, getting the construction company to have their own concept of it, rather than having somebody whose job it was to be the sustainability person.”

She added: “That’s something that I have brought here—it’s everybody’s job. I don’t think you can build a better city by having one expert. Cities take a lot of expertise and, particularly in a local government context, we have to manage a lot of the things that we build for a long time afterwards. We have spent the last two years breaking down the silos between the different built environment disciplines.”

However, Cary is also clear that involving all professions is necessary but also insufficient: true co-creation will only happen when the communities affected by development are brought on board at an early stage as possible. To that end, Cary referenced the recently released report from the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, which urged local planning authorities to engage the public in strategic planning, rather than simply asking for their views on individual projects. Cary referenced Enfield’s work on its local plan as a case in point.

“We did a lot of engagement around our local plan and we did it in lots of ways,” she said. “People could write formal submissions, but we also did a lot around social media and held quizzes. We asked which buildings people liked out of a series of five. We had a lighter touch website where people could just leave comments and see what others had said. That was good, but we can still get better.”

‘It’s not just about receiving information—it’s about communicating back.’

Quite apart from just being the right thing for a democratic body to do, Cary said that engaging communities in strategic planning can help people understand that planning and development is a delicate business and one that involves often incompatible priorities. “If you bring people in at a strategic planning phase, they have to make choices,” she said. “Residents who are opposing a development often don’t understand that by saying no to one development they have to say yes to something else. It is much easier to engage people in a strategic discussion about an area than it is by looking at an individual planning application. You’re going to get a better outcome, but you are also going to have less hassle in terms of all the different ways in which a development can be stopped.”
Cary admitted that it is “impossible” to get everyone on board, but added that the potential for conflict can be minimised if planning authorities take the time to explain how concerns have been addressed and treat planning documents as things that should be a source of civic pride. “It’s not just about receiving information—it’s about communicating back,” she said.

“After all the engagement we get everyone who has been involved together and say ‘this is what we have agreed and we would like you to come and celebrate’,” she said. “We don’t just adopt planning documents; we try to have an evening celebration about them. When we adopted our heritage strategy, for example, we had a party to launch the document.”

Shingler agreed that engaging early and explaining how feedback has informed the decision-making process is essential. He referenced Sheppard Robson’s work with Places for People and Balfour Beatty on the East Wick and Sweetwater development in Olympic Park, which will ultimately deliver 1,500 homes over five phases on a site adjacent to Hackney Wick. “When we embarked on that, we engaged with the local community in Hackney Wick and they were worried about gentrification,” said Shingler. “They didn’t want bridges connecting East Wick and Sweetwater to Hackney Wick. They see themselves as their own little live/work environment and they don’t want prices to go up. At the same time, they want to benefit from the park and houses need to be delivered, so how do you start to engage with new people that are moving to the area, existing communities and businesses?”

The solution, Shingler explained, is to make use of modern technology to engage with as many people as possible. “We started looking at smart data, so apps that encourage consultation and communication between new and existing residents and local businesses,” he said. “It seems to me that there is an opportunity to use the collection of data to pick up common threads and then communicate back through the same platform and show that things are changing.”

Cary agreed. “The use of apps is good and it does engage with people who wouldn’t show up at a public meeting to oppose or support something and who are actually pretty neutral about it,” she said. “They are never going to write in and oppose or support something. A lot of people just think ‘it’s fine.’ Apps can encourage people.”

In terms of public attitudes, Shingler added that there has “been a shift in consciousness around values for sustainability and not just climate change” in recent years, pointing out that the issue has rocketed up the agenda. Has that had an impact on Cary’s thinking?

“When I first got into masterplanning and design work, even before British Land, the mantra was sustainable development and the definition everyone used was about living and acting and making decisions as if you were making decisions for the next seven generations,” she said. “So, it was thinking about the long term—not wasting resources so that future generations could have them.”

In the last year, however, Cary has re-examined that analysis in light of both climate events and high-profile campaigns, not least by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg and activist group Extinction Rebellion. “It’s not about seven generations anymore,” she said. “It’s about the house being on fire—it’s about today. It used to be that we were doing development but in the long term we will have a positive impact. Now, I don’t think we can get away with that. The weather is weird and it’s going to get weirder.”

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Sarah Cary, Executive Director of Place, Enfield Council
Early and strategic engagement has been used in Enfield to promote socially and environmentally sustainable development. One of the three pillars for the vision developed for Meridian Water includes ‘park life at your doorstep’, envisioned here in illustrative format.

The Meridian Water development in Enfield (a waterfront proposal visualised here) features a pioneering approach to regeneration, with Enfield Council actively leading the entire project to ensure maximum benefits for local communities.
Ensuring that developments are as sustainable as possible obviously involves paying close attention to both the energy performance of new buildings and the materials used in construction, but Shingler added that it is also about how design can influence new residents’ behaviour.

“From my perspective, when you’re looking at masterplans, the long-term objective is to change behaviour for people who live in communities, so they just think differently from an environmental perspective,” he said. “So, you choose to walk or cycle rather than get in your car; and you plan the community so that it encourages this choice. It’s just having a more sustainability-conscious lifestyle.”

However, Cary urged that architecture as a profession—rather than Sheppard Robson per se—needs to think more carefully when it comes to the embodied carbon contained in building materials, especially concrete and steel, as well as how they have been manufactured and by whom.

“I would also say architects need to think more about the impact that their buildings have, whether that’s embodied carbon or where materials come from and who makes them,” she said. “I do think it’s weird how you are trained. You’re taught to think about how people inhabit them, but not where the stuff comes from.”

On the co-creation front, though, Cary added that her experience of working with architects had been positive, both at Enfield and at British Land. “Maybe I have been lucky, but I feel that the architects I have worked with in London set a very good standard for co-creation or at least listening and taking on different views,” she said. “We can always be better at it, but I would say you should celebrate what you already do and refine it and make it even better.”
When we started this project nearly a year ago by reflecting back to our history and speculating about the future, we were happily working alongside each other in our Camden office, blissfully unaware that we would be concluding this study from our homes.

This process of looking back and envisioning futures has now become a daily exercise, one which evolves rapidly in response to the unexpected, and often frightening, changes that are continually playing out in real time. Through this uncertainty and understandable apprehension, however, from the confines of our homes we are also witnessing an unprecedented shift, not just in the processes of adjusting to home working, but a more meaningful, widespread recognition of the need for a restructuring of societal values.

It would seem myopic when concluding this publication, and reflecting on the ideas we have brought together, to not think about how the current world around us will impact the idea of co-creation.

As journalist and author Naomi Klein said: ‘Things become possible in the midst of crisis that are not possible without crisis.’ This crisis has challenged our societal expectations of what it means to care for our communities, making it resoundingly clear that the places we inhabit are critical to wellbeing, and that as architects it’s our responsibility to safeguard the quality of these places. This situation reinforces the notion that architects must aspire to make the most of the changing social atmosphere to enact positive change, with the ability to re-envision our built environment bolstered by a current overwhelming willingness to drive a recalibration of development values.

In this light, we ask again, what is the role of the architect—of both our ever-evolving present, and of the many possible futures that lay before us? We have witnessed the rapid mobilisation of architects in responding to the crisis, in a profession that is often accused of being too slow or unwilling to adapt.
Though engagement processes like co-creation may not be the norm, perhaps we have collectively been offered a chance to envision a different future, one that connects with communities and the environment.

We believe that this same impetus can be harnessed beyond the current pandemic, positioning the role of the architect as an advocate, in pursuit of rebalanced development ethics that position people, wellbeing and sustainability at its core.

In the same vein as to co-creation, this recalibration will require, what Professor Rachel Cooper refers to as, “divergent thinking,” and when promoting processes that put people at the heart of the design process, it is vital to refer back to the broad framework of Listening, Trusting, Communicating, Empowering, and Advocating outlined in this publication.

Of course, there are still very real barriers to adopting co-creation, or other people-first, approaches to most projects. As architects and designers of the built environment, we can encourage co-creation and improved engagement in the following ways:

1. **Promote honest feedback through a process that does not shy away from conflict or messiness**, knowing that this will build a stronger foundation of trust. Recognise that the tools of co-creation can be used to engage, heal tension, and move forward productively.
2. Enable participation by identifying the unique needs of each project’s end users and stakeholders—such as mothers, full-time workers, or young people—and their barriers to participation. Build awareness of user needs and power dynamics to make the process work for participants, to ensure high-quality, balanced, and honest feedback.

57 Creating opportunities for participation and discussion through a variety of activities outside of the typical box of engagement enables a more open, honest and comprehensive feedback process. At Chrisp Street, a programme of community events was held in tandem with open and ongoing feedback sessions in the town centre.

58 At the London Deloitte headquarters, an in-depth participation process led to an innovative space that enables Deloitte to collaborate with clients to solve their most complex business challenges.

59 Sheppard Robson promotes a wide range of community initiatives that engage young minds with architecture to improve built environment for future generations.
3. Invest in time to build co-creation into the design process, through a continuous framework that persists throughout the entirety of a project.

Investing in the necessary time for a comprehensive engagement process requires a shift to more ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ ways of working, that intervene earlier in the briefing process as well as with high-level planning and development policy; this requires engagement across a wide-reaching spectrum, spanning from programming with students (pictured here) to lobbying for more progressive strategic planning and development policies.
4. Understand the wider development context, and that effective co-creation starts at the earliest possible stage. Advocate for reforms to planning policy, to enable engagement and architectural expertise both earlier and later on in the development process.
5. Push forward the sustainable agenda, integrating sustainability into co-creation as a vital element to ethical design.
Co-creation presents a clear path forward for architecture, rooted in dexterity and a willingness to adapt to the needs of society. This does not detract or threaten the role of the architect, instead positioning architects as integral to the development process—as not merely a service provider, but a central driving force—stitching together a complex milieu to set the rhythm and tempo of a project.

These principles have helped define Sheppard Robson as a practice and continue to underpin our future, reinforcing the notion that design that responds to societal need is always relevant, offering some clarity through turbulent times past, present or future. By advancing processes of co-creation that centre on communities and the environment, architects can move beyond the role of simply designer, to conductor of more ethical development for the 21st Century.
Special thanks to the participants of Sheppard Robson’s 80th anniversary roundtable discussion, whose insights on the role of the architect made way for this study.

**Vicky Richardson**, Curator & Writer

**Rory Olcayto**, former Chief Executive, Open City

**Lawrence Barth**, Senior Lecturer, the Architectural Association

**Jack Sallabank**, Founder, Future Places Studio

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**Dinah Bornat**, Director, ZCD Architects

**Nick Jacobs**, CEO, Rowan Asset Management

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