HANDS ON

THE PRINCE OF WALES'S INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTURE

PRACTICAL PROJECTS NEWSLETTER

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It poured with rain at the opening of the "Green Room" in London's Docklands. But no-one seemed to mind. There was a reverential atmosphere as guests took in the extraordinary wigwam-like edifice, set in Rotherhithe's Stave Hill Ecological Park, only a stone's throw across the river from Canary Wharf.

Smoke from an open fire wafted from the entrance mingled with the aroma of hot dogs. Crates of beer and a bottle of bubbly appeared. Two men balanced on makeshift ladders to saw and hammer in a last few planks. Eventually, the banging stopped; a tape strung across the entrance was ceremoniously cut by the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture's Director, Dr Brian Hanson, and drenched local school children poured inside to dry themselves and take possession.

The Green Room is a product of the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture's first 'live project' and demonstrates a dynamic practical approach to architectural education which is becoming increasingly popular. The idea is that working on 'real' or 'live' projects rather than abstract exercises, provides not only a better learning experience but also a valuable resource for the community.

The Green Room illustrates how it can happen. The project emerged from discussions between the Institute and the Trust for Urban Ecology (TRUE), a charity which manages several London ecololgy parks. TRUE wanted a shelter in its Rotherhithe park as an observation point and community focus. The adjacent Bacon Education College offered to help with long term management.

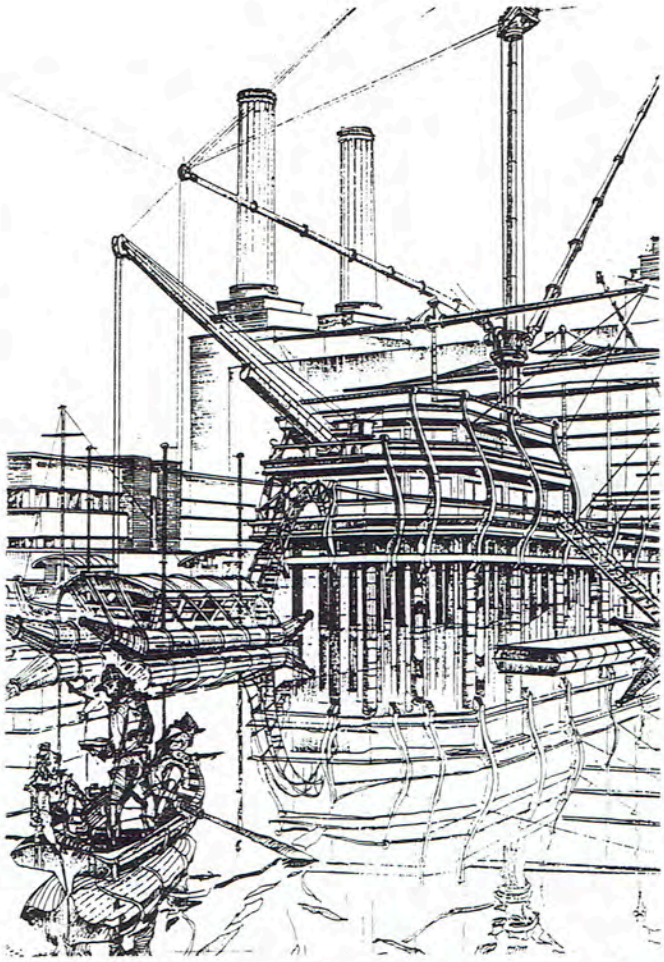
"The Green Room," Stave Hill Ecological Park, Rotherhithe; the only public shelter in the park its appealing form has proved to be a significant focal point. It is now in regular use as an informal classroom both for school children and summer lectures and as a centre for the launch of events and publications by the friends of Stave Hill

The Institute was keen to develop links with the Hungarian architect Imre Makovecz and invited three architects from his office to come over and help. Fifteen students from South Bank University Architecture School were assigned to the project along with a similar number from the Institute.

A brief was drawn up by all the participants which stressed that the structure had to be practical, secure, affordable, and buildable - by the students -within 2 months. All students prepared designs, then voted -along with the client groups- on which one should be built. They then constructed it using materials provided cheaply by local firms. Total cost of this uplifting and useful addition to Rotherhithe's built environment: a mere £3,000.

The Green Room project was instigated by the Institute itself. On other occasions the Institute responds to calls for help. This happened when a house boat owner was faced with eviction because of the imminent demolition of Battersea's Nine Elms pier where he was moored. Three students were put on the case and investigated the background by approaching the parties involved. They included the landowners British Gas and the Crown Estate, the Port of London Authority which issues mooring licences, Wandsworth Council and several community groups. Expert advice was sought from Ove Arup Associates and from a solicitor. The students concluded that demolishing the pier was unnecessary and produced an imaginative scheme to improve it with extra residential moorings, floating workshops, a boatyard, cafe and chandler's shop.

The Green Room *was built by Foundation Year students over six weeks, many of whom had no experience in timber construction.*



Vauxhall Daydream; *One of several proposals for Nine Elms Pier which helped to persuade the landowners and authorities that it was worth saving. The mixed use scheme demonstrates that the Pier could be used for moorings and a riverbus or taxi stop. The deck would be open to the public with a restaurant, chandlery and workshops. A tired industrial site is turned into a place of festivity.*

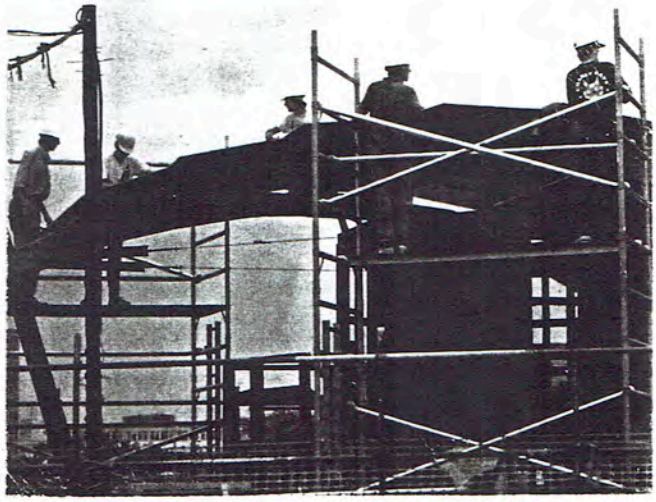
A seminar, organised for all the parties involved, then led to the PLA agreeing to consider a 60-year mooring lease and British Gas offering to reconsider demolition. Wandsworth Council was so impressed with the student's work that it commissioned them to prepare a strategic report for the Borough's riverfront as a whole.

This was London's Liquid Asset, in which the students outlined 25 proposals for improving Wandsworth's Riverside, which was launched in July aboard aRiverbus.The guests, representatives from the major organisations involved in the River were introduced to the students' ideas during a lively presentation and discussion, using the view of the Riverside as visual support. As they passed Nine Elms Pier they were treated to a water's-eye view of the latest live project, a practical extension of the Institute's original involvement with the Pier. The brief for the students was to design and build a sheltered meeting place and observation point similiar to the Green Room but over a period of only ten days. As a follow on to the Report the Institutewill next year be running a project involving the students developing proposals for the Guinness site, further upstream in Wandsworth.

Ralph Perry Robinson was one of the students involved. "We've made people appreciate the pier's potential and got them talking together. We're making Londoners more aware of the River and how to improve life in the city."he says."We've also learnt an incredible amount about bureaucracies, the planning system and how to use presentation techniques like site models. We're discovering how the city actually works, not just how it theoretically works. Live projects are the most potent aspect of the Institute's course. They equip me for the real world."

Live projects with community groups started to occur in some architecture schools in the late Sixties. But they were mostly squeezed out by professors who preferred the comfort of the academic ivory tower to the messy real world of development politics. According to the Chairman of the RIBA Community Architecture Group's Education Committee, Robert Fowles, there is now renewed interest in response to the need to make the architecture profession more relevant. A recent survey by the Group found that 10 schools had some kind of live project programme, Cardiff and Hull being the most consistent. "Our conclusions are that all schools of architecture could easily set up their own community technical aid centres or live project offices -there's so much demand" says Fowles.

Meeting that demand is certainly keeping the Institute's energetic Live Projects Coordinator, Melanie Agace, extremely busy. Students have been assigned to work with Hunt Thompson Associates on Community Planning Weekends and on planning controversies at Kings Cross and Spitalfields. One team is attempting to resolve a planning problem at Salisbury Cathedral, at the request of Ted Heath (wearing a local resident rather than ex prime minister's hat).



Nine Elms Pier; Once under way, construction proceeded well, with the hardworking students, entusiastically rallying together, keen to learn and exchange skills.

Nine Elms Pier; Saved from demolition by the students, the design and build project provides the small practical anchor establishing the Institutes continued interest inthe Pier. It will help the boat owners Association to begin improving the Pier and facilities for themselves and the public.

Nine Elms Pier; Many of the materials used came from suppliers who generously donated building materials for the project. Without this generousity, such projects would not be able to continue.

"What we are trying to do is create a sustainable live projects unit which involves all aspects of the Institute and provides a model for others to follow" says Agace. "The Institute is ideally placed to help communities with urban regeneration by providing vision and expertise from an independent standpoint. Students benefit as well. They get thrown in at the deep end and that makes them take responsibility and helps them grow up."

Institute Director, Brian Hanson, puts the approach into context: "The Institute is multifaceted. One facet is teaching students, and that is the aspect that most people know about. But at heart, the Institute is about changing things, building things. Ultimately we have to be judged on the quality of what gets built as a result of our actions or involvement. Live projects are not just an exercise in participation. They're about supporting the work of professionals, building things, promoting things. We have an important role as an organisation that speaks out on various issues and takes a line, loudly and publicly. Live projects are a good way of reminding people of this role."

Nick Wates.

The students provide a labour of love on these projects but materials and qualified supervision is expensive.

In order that practical projects such as these can continue, the cost to the Institute has to be kept to a minimum.

Your support is sought through the donation or discount of building materials.

If you would like to become involved, wish to know more or have any suggestions to make, please contact:

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Vauxhall Daydream from a drawing by Ivan Kniazev.
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"The Green Room;" The students and tutors at the completion of the structure. Despite difficult spring weather conditions, the students worked hard and the project was completed at the end of March, as scheduled.