Exploring Regeneration through Design for Social Impact

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Abstract

This paper shares the teaching approach and student response to two University of South Australia 2023 courses. The first, a compulsory Masters Architectural Design Studio focusing on regenerative environmental and social performance outcomes. The brief tasked students to repurpose a carpark edging a green space in an inner city suburb with a speculative proposal for (700-1200sqm) civic facility for gathering, regeneration and learning- i.e. promoting social and environmental resilience. The subsequent elective course Design for Social Impact taken by a smaller cohort, tasked the students with designing the process they would follow if they specifically sought to maximise the social value of their project from the studio brief in the previous semester. This involved designing the process of social engagement and planning innovative ways to measure social impact throughout that process.

Regeneration was explored in both physical and environmental terms (carpark conversion to biodiverse community facility), as well as social with community repair, rebuilding social cohesion through design led engagement acts of care- considering social connection as generative. The paper will present both the pedagogical framework of each course and selected student responses.

Keywords: Regenerative Design; Social Impact; Design Led Engagement; Social Cohesion; Community Engagement

Introduction

This paper will discuss two complementary courses that ran in 2023 at the University of South Australia. The first was a compulsory design studio of around 80 students in the professional Master of Architecture degree and the second was an elective open to any Masters students from within the Creative Faculty. The paper will focus on the work of a few students who took both subjects and after completing the compulsory Architectural design studio then subsequently utilized the focus of the elective to further expand the richness of their studio work. The work of these students was chosen to demonstrate the relationship between the pedagogical sequence and thematic exploration of the two courses. Consent was granted to the author by the students for their work to be published

and for them to be named. Before discussing the student work, a brief introduction to each course is provided to situate the context and the task the students were given and the pedagogical aims underpinning those tasks.

Advanced Architectural Design Studio focusing on Environment

Advanced Architectural Design Studio focusing on Environment is offered in the first semester of the Master of Architecture which is a professional degree taken as part of a pathway to registration as an Architect. The studio advocates that Architecture delivers greatest social resonance at the scale of the everyday, and the greatest environmental performance when it works in symbiosis with the natural world. These themes of Environmental Performance and Social Performance are brought together within a Regenerative Design approach on an urban site. Over the past 4 years since 2021, I have run a similar civic brief on different adjacent sites within a few hundred metres of one another in the boundary proximity of a prominent urban open space. The studio brief is to deliver an invigorated collaborative community centre which offers a cluster of spaces with programs for communal gathering and social benefit, whilst also offering all ages learning about sustaining the environment and acting respectfully in celebrating the natural systems we live within. The facility thus aims to provide social connection and embodied learning about our connections with nature for a range of ages, through programs including commercial kitchen, a movement studio and specialty libraries and workshops for learning and skill sharing.

Each year the studio has run, the brief has been adapted with variations and situated on a different site (on the surrounding boundary of the same open green space). In 2023, the site selected was an underutilized open-air at grade public carpark and the brief included 1200sqm of required community spaces; Commercial kitchen, Multipurpose space, Wet laboratory, two specialty libraries, three workshop or teaching spaces, a Body movement space and service spaces (offices/toilets). Students were deliberately exposed to different procurement models than the traditional form of design engagement wherein they are provided with a pre-formed client and their specified brief. By contrast with that method of procurement, students in this studio also had to include a speculative proposition aimed to engage them as agents of change needing to think in terms of systems and how to create societal change through their capacity as Architects. It was presented to them as follows:

> This is introduced in this studio for your consideration by contrast with the expectation that your sole employment pathway requires seeking employment from an established practice – and that what work you will do is dependent upon what work the 'boss' pitches for and the time you spend on it is determined by the terms they've already contracted.

> Speculative design is uncertain, you can invest a lot of time/care and find the economic conditions unsupportive in proceeding to engage you on your design. And yet, speculative design also provides you opportunity to apply your creative capacity to more than a task predetermined by another. In speculative design you can re-design a system, a place and can sometimes have a much greater impact on society. In a speculative design you are focused on demonstrating the value your design

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proposal is offering because the client group and funding pipeline may not yet be confirmed. Your design will be necessary to 'sell' the idea through visual narrative and compelling argument for why what you create holds the promise to deliver on social and environmental performance aims. [1]

Students were provided with a set of performance brief parameters and asked to include additional speculative program which they felt could produce those performance outcomes. This model of design practice can also be considered a form of design entrepreneurship. Among a range of literature students were directed toward, was a piece from *The Conversation* which discussed how 'Post-pandemic cities can permanently reclaim public spaces as gathering places'[2] and a piece in *Architecture AU* which proposed dispersed Urbanism as a response to the pandemic

> Dense and super-local, it would comprise a series of overlapping spatial networks centred on small-scale community-based facilities – the market, the school, the park.
>
> These networks would become polycentric to the point that density is more evenly distributed and the notion of a centre in any physical sense dissolves.
>
> The outcome would be diverse-use neighbourhoods in which the physical needs of the community are largely satisfied by endeavours of the same community, while digital and goods delivery networks enable connection and distribution in a wider sense. [3]

This literature encouraged them to think in terms of systems and societal dynamics that their speculation would contribute toward, so they began with an aim for what their facility would 'do' for people, what it would make possible, and these initial considerations then informed the optimal facility design and choices for materials, aesthetics and experience. Students were referred to international exemplars for inspiration such as the London Participatory City project[4], Community Lovers Guide and Places to Practice[5] and Professor Ezio Manzini's Collaborative Services[6] model. They were tasked with site analysis to determine many things among them the existing demographics in the area and which portions of that were under-served by current facilities and infrastructure. One of the performance aims was building social inclusion and bringing opportunities for social connection across different age groups and demographics. Thus, students were invited to create seven character types that represented the demographic mix and create a vision of

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[1] Edmonds A 2023 Regeneration and Resilience_*Dunstone Grove, Linde Reserve R & R study Guide for Arch 4033* p5

[2] Broudehoux Anne Marie in The Conversation Jan 4, 2021, https://theconversation.com/post-pandemic-cities-can-permanently-reclaim-public-spaces-as-gathering-places-150729 (accessed January 4, 2025)

[3] Panov A. & Scott A. Embracing limit and finding joyfulness in Architecture AU 12 Jan 2021. https://architectureau.com/articles/embracing-limit-and-finding-joyfulness/ (accessed January 4, 2025)

[4] https://www.participatorycity.org/

[5] https://www.participatorycity.org/places-to-practise

[6] https://www.strategicdesignscenarios.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/EMUDE_Collaborative-Services.pdf

what they wanted their design to make possible for these characters. The following prompts were offered for their consideration regarding their vision and characters; *What connection will they have opportunity to forge with others, and with their environment as a consequence of becoming involved in the facility you design? What specific performance outcomes does your vision aspire to achieve?.* This preliminary work occurred alongside the environmental site analysis informing possible moves on site to catalyse connection with the environment and particular features of the site's conditions. Before progressing to two examples of student responses to this studio task, the following will outline the approach of the second course this paper discusses—Design for Social Impact.

Design For Social Impact

Design for Social Impact was offered in the second semester of 2023 and open to all Masters students within the Creative faculty. Twenty students enrolled in 2023 from a range of disciplines including illustration, interiors, urban and regional planning, fine art and architecture. The student work this paper will discuss includes two students from Architecture who completed the design studio brief just described and then continued to work on that project in Design for Social Impact. The intention of Design for Social Impact is to provide students an introduction to the rapidly growing area and need for response to demonstrating social value in creative works. Internationally this is informed by the Social Value Act in the UK which was established in 2013[7] and in competitive procurement processes in the UK, people who commission public services are required to account for their track record in delivering social value in their work. Whilst many creatives and design professionals are considered 'guns for hire' responding to the needs of a brief determined in advance of their involvement by a fee-paying client with their own agenda, this course introduces students to the politics of this system and considerations of their own agency and how the process of design might be disrupted or adapted for the benefit of end user experiences and greater social value. Thus, the course focuses on inviting students to design the design process itself, rather than addressing the outcomes of a standard creative or studio brief culminating in an object, building or campaign strategy. Many students struggled to integrate and understand this opportunity initially as they were so accustomed to following the process laid out by their course coordinator in a design studio brief through a sequence of assessment milestones and tasks. For all students in the course, it had not previously occurred to them that the sequence of the process they would take is also an element to be designed and is an element they may advocate to reclaim in practice. Once this differentiated approach had been understood, many relished and embraced the opportunity with great gusto as the following evaluation comments demonstrate:

- *"Through the completion of this course, I have been exposed to content that I have never been taught through previous courses. This course is unique as I was able to obtain real-life skills and view current social issues in a new perspective. As a communication designer I was able to learn how to design a design process, rather than just undertake the design process to produce a final outcome. This learning was*

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[7] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-value-act-information-and-resources/social-value-act-information-and-resources

new to me and has not been taught in my five years of tertiary study." (student enrolled in *Design for Social Impact* 2022)

- *"The course provided important insights into areas I had not previously considered. Being able to demonstrate how to apply this through the project was invaluable and will be central to future projects.*" (student enrolled in *Design for Social Impact* 2022)

As I have noted elsewhere:

> The way design supports social connection is […] through attention to, and restructuring of, relationships — [….] design can build trust, capacity, cultural safety, capability and leverage innovation to change systems. Investment by individuals and community are important factors since they are the process through which individuals have connection to, and stewardship over, the results of projects that have happened in their locale. In essence, design processes can deliver exceptional social value that establish and nurture the social fabric of society. Design can restructure relationships to address inequity and support social connection. It has been long understood that architects deliver urban fabric, and yet the way in which we do that also either helps or hinders the social fabric which sustains it.[8]

The sequence of Design for Social Impact is structured by two assessment tasks. The first is to create a library of tools by focusing on three elements and using extensive international research to select precedent examples of each element to present in a one page prescribed format. Each student is tasked with presenting one social indicator, one design process method that maximises social value and one evaluation or measurement approach. Requiring the students to begin with precedent studies gives them opportunity to discover the breadth of work happening around the world in this rapidly growing area and to develop critical analysis of these elements as they become exposed to more and more of them. The required standardised reporting and formatting for assessment of each element also involves critical evaluation of particular elements such as the extent to which the example shares power with stakeholders, or the mechanisms by which it builds trust, or whether the technique focuses on the value of the process or the outcome. This process of critically evaluating precedents through these lenses creates a deeper appreciation and understanding of the systems politics that operate in the utilization of these elements. Students present their individual three elements – each on an A3 page formatted in a consistent way across the year group. Then, following presentation, all students have access to the work of everyone else as a 'collective' toolkit is established from their work for all to use as a reference. 2023 was the second time the course ran and from the outset students were provided with the toolkit of sixty elements of precedents created by the 2022 cohort and required to ensure they did not duplicate any of those elements but built upon that foundation to expand the collective toolkit. This also assisted to develop a sense of custodianship and responsibility amongst the student cohort that is fundamental to a regenerative design approach infused with care.

Armed with their toolkit of one hundred and twenty examples (sixty from each year cohort), the students were then provided the second assessment task and major project of the

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[8] Edmonds A 'Supporting social value through the design process' Environment Note Australian Institute of Architects Nov 2021 https://acumen.architecture.com.au/environment/equity/supporting-social-value-through-the-design-process/ (accessed January 5 2025) p10 in print

course. They were asked to take their current or a recently completed studio brief and design the sequence and activities the process would need if the aim of the project was to maximise the social value delivered by that brief. As described above many students struggled at first to appreciate what that task was asking of them, as they were so accustomed as 'designers' to addressing the brief in a mode of being 'production' oriented rather than process oriented. This task required them to relinquish that production focus and zoom in to better understanding and designing for the process and opportunities to innovate 'how' the design sequence would unfold, who would be involved at different stages, what their involvement would offer them, how their contribution would be integrated and how frequently they would be called upon. The process began with mapping all the living creatures (stakeholders) that would be affected by the outcomes of the design brief and mapping their relative power and influence, and working through how they could be invited to contribute and be involved in the process. This approach is in stark contrast to mainstream procurement processes that begin with a design team winning a job and following the sequence instructed by a fee paying client only. In public work, the fee paying client often attempts to speak on behalf of the end user client or does not include consulting with them in the scope of agreed works in a fee proposal. Consequently, the Design for Social Impact course advocated that it is a professional responsibility to liaise closely with the end users during the design process and thus designers need to compellingly explain the value of this to the fee paying client so that they agree to include it in the contract scope. Thus, the course aimed to empower soon to be graduates with techniques to effect such redesign of procurement, method and scope agreements.
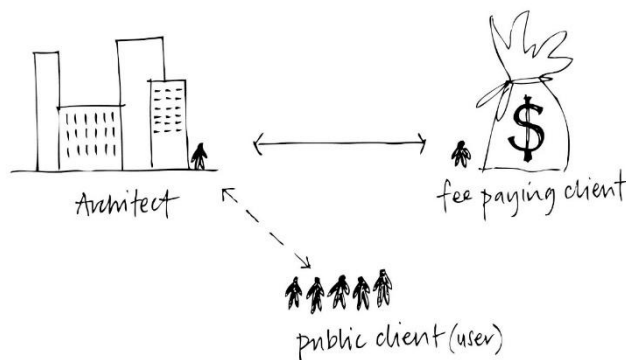

Figure 1: authors own used in Design studio lectures + Continuing professional development for Australian and New Zealand Institute of Architects in 2013.[Note architect and fee paying client link is direct, whilst end user is a dashed line]

This distinction of power relations had become evident to students during the establishing of the toolkit as they researched precedent indicators, design and evaluation methods. In the second project they then needed to apply that towards the design brief they were currently working upon or had recently worked on. Two Master of Architecture students, Ella Leak and Taylor Cunningham, undertook Design for Social Impact following the Architectural Masters design studio previously described. These two students were encouraged to think carefully about how the process they designed would help or hinder the social fabric that would sustain their community facility. All students in the elective were

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encouraged to analyse the studio brief as it was given to them and adapt or refine it as necessary to maximise the social value of the outcomes of the project. The following will describe the responses of Ella and Taylor to these tasks and the relationship between the two courses that they benefited from.

The design work of Ella Leak in response to these courses

In her response to the Architectural Design studio 'additional' speculative programs, Ella included processes for waste management as well as the inclusion of a seedbank, wetlab and storage facility on site, to enable her facility to act as a native rehabilitation centre for the adjacent green open space, residential properties and additional council land. She proposed a program called 'Friends of the Billabong' to be offered by Council allowing community members to "volunteer and help restore and preserve the unique native habitat of St Peters Billabong." Through this program her regenerative design aimed to create a net positive impact on native biodiversity and sustainability as outlined in her design work below.

Figure 2: Ella Leak. Regenerative Design (Gathering Place submission Arch 4033 SP2 2023)

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REGENERATIVE DESIGN

Using the seedbank, wetlab and storage facilities on site, Amaroo is intended to act as a native rehabilitation centre for linde reserve, residential properties and additional council land.
Thus, the regenerative design strives for a net positive impact on native biodiversity and sustainability.

FRIENDS OF THE BILLABONG

Friends of the Billabong (FOB) is a council run initiative allowing community members to "volunteer and help restore and preserve the unique native habitat of St Peters Billabong."
The design aims to reinforce and support further work for the FOB, becoming a place to promote regrowth and help sustain a thriving ecosystem.

AMBITION

100 seeds planted per week: 5200 a year.
80% used for council/native land: 4160
20% used for residents: 1040

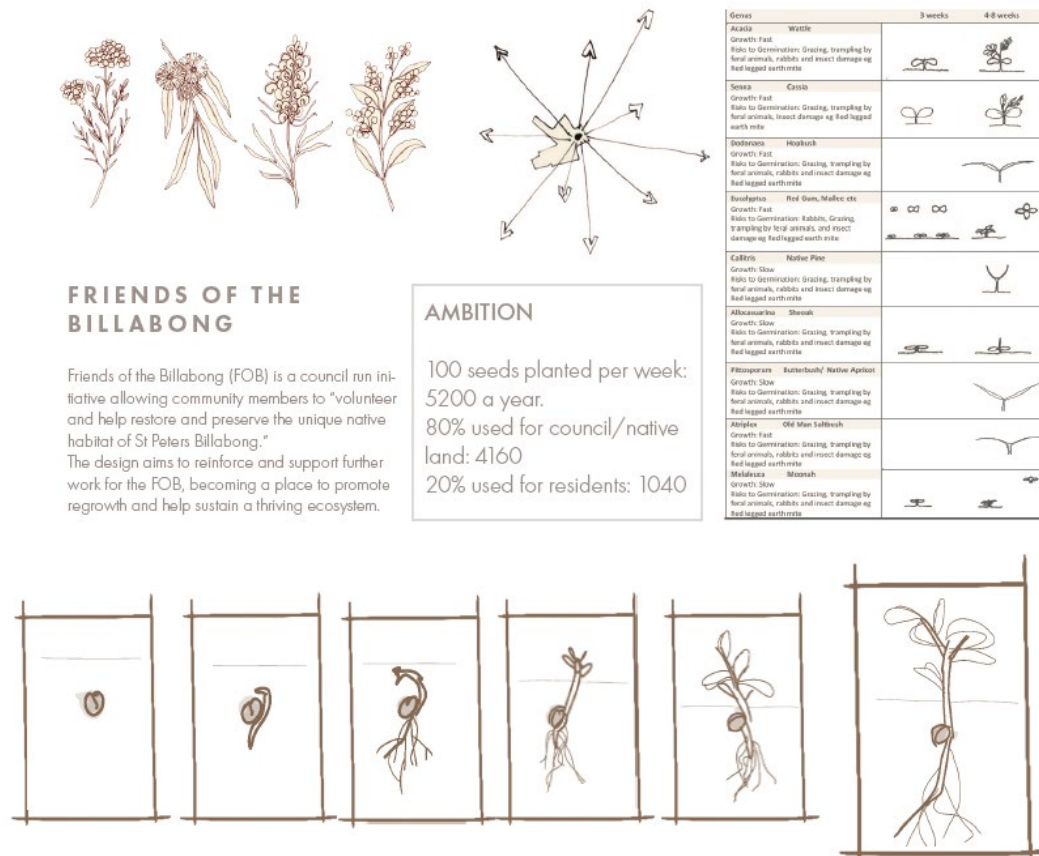Seedling growth and progression on display to community in stages of 8 weeks.

Figure 3: Ella Leak. Regenerative Design (Gathering Place submission Arch 4033 SP2 2023)

In her Design for Social Impact work, Ella maintained those aspects of the brief and added – as a consequence of her research on the demographics the centre would serve, that the underlying themes and ambitions for the workshops and activities would seek to maximise cultural inclusivity and connectedness. This ensured the regenerative ambition was both environmental and social. One of the mechanisms to achieve this was to focus on casual communication and engagement opportunities to highlight the importance of welcoming diverse neighbours and mixing with diverse groups. Ella began this sequence with mapping the agency of the multiple stakeholders with respect to their relative power and influence to plan how they needed to be managed from 'monitor, keep informed, keep satisfied and actively engaged'. She produced a 'problem tree' which mapped the issues, causes and community impact effects of cultural divergence and then created a Theory of Change sequence to plan the vision of her intent and its anticipated systemic function and impacts. This resulted in a concise aim for her proposal to 'foster and create preconditions within the social fabric that will support the community centre's ability to enliven multicultural

diversity, support ongoing community ownership and ensure intergenerational engagement on site and beyond.'

An important part of planning the process of the design sequence was to also determine the indicators of social value specific to this project. Ella nominated four outcome indicators: engagement, curiosity and insight, social mixing and social inclusion. She also nominated two process indicators: voice and trust. Each of those indicators had 2-4 elements that would be measured as below. These included sensitivity to power dynamics and how specific indicators would have a sensitive emphasis for minority groups.
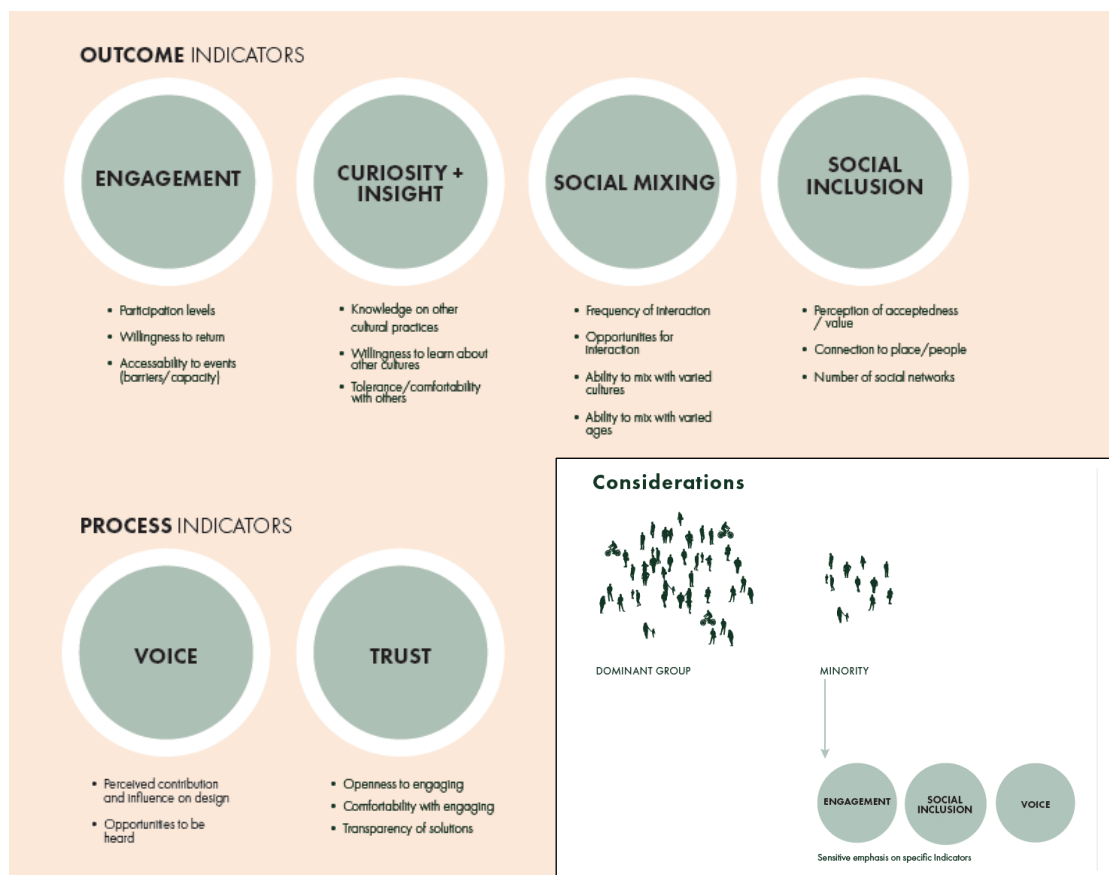

Figure 4: Ella Leak. Regenerative Design (Gathering Place submission Arch 4033 SP2 2023)

Her design sequence involved stages of ask, propose and act and utilized both synchronous and asynchronous forms of engagement both in person and online. These engagement activities were varied and rich. I am precluded by length to provide detail but they included pop up events on site to provide introduction, information and conversation about what is planned and illicit contact for following events of potluck dinners, coffee dates, lay a blanket, pick a piece (latter two were facilitated gatherings). Subsequently a temporary pavilion would be erected in the park adjacent to the construction site to become a meeting place with initially programmed events and invitation to community members to initiate more. These included seed swapping, quizzes, creative workshops, cooking workshops and sharing (plant to plate), community co-designed installations of design and program ideas among others. The sequence of the design process proposed planned evaluations from baseline, midway check ins and at the conclusion and achieved an accomplished balance of

stabilising structure and openness for community ownership and innovation to 'make it their own'.

The outcome she achieved in her design report and pitch presentation made clear the value proposition such that a fee paying client would be convinced that this level of community program and engagement was a terrific opportunity to value add and vital to be included in the scope of works, given the social value it delivered and embodied into the architectural design work, which might otherwise have stood empty upon completion waiting for visitors shy to engage with one another. A year after taking the Design for Social Impact course, when undertaking her final year of study Ella described to me in email referring to the Design for Social Impact course *'It's informed my final studio so so much*!'.

The design work of Taylor Cunningham in response to these courses

Taylor's studio proposal was described as

"[A]n approach focused on maximizing positive impacts specific to the place, community, and culture of the project. [....] The building is designed to underpin the importance of the human senses. The five senses; sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing…aspects many people take for granted each day. With the assistance of neurodivergent research, the building has been designed to enhance the human connection to spaces through the use of five colours signifying each sense and achieved through sensory walls, playnets, and landscaping to enhance the design. Designing with neurodiversity in mind has allowed prior research to inform design choices based on the senses, from texture, sound, layout, and quality and colour of light to the shape and function of the furniture. 'Library of Things' features are informed based on the five senses and the needs of South Australian people. A braille library has been designed and will be the only physical braille library in South Australia, additionally, a sound lab has been incorporated."
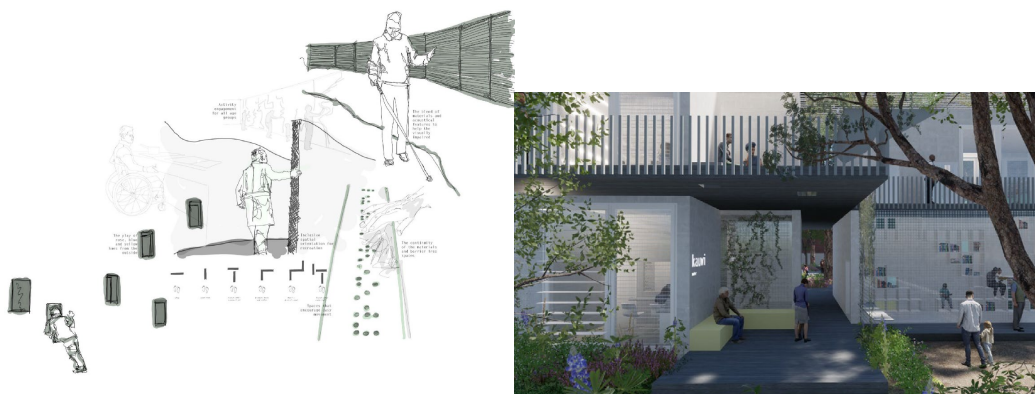

Figure 5: Taylor Cunningham. (above and next) Equity: Universal Inclusion & Equity and Inclusion (Gathering Place submission Arch 4033 SP2 2023)

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Figure 6: Taylor Cunningham Image to illustrate the intentions re connecting to Nature and engagement of sensory opportunities. (Gathering Place submission Arch 4033 SP2 2023)

Taylor's Design for Social Impact work was titled BOND and included 'a theory of change which sought to re frame our relationships with the natural world and with one another. BOND utilizes soft infrastructure through a BOND POD to implement immediate engagement to guide users to take actions daily to make their community stronger and more resilient.' The sequence Taylor settled upon 'uses 7 main processes; phase one scoping for the future: scoping, asking, proposing, refining, and phase two; delivering, acting, and finally assessing/evaluating which occurs over both phases. Flexibility is achieved by dividing the process into two major phases these being; scoping for the future and actioning findings.' Three primary indicators for measurement were selected; trust, resilience and social connectedness complimented by ten secondary indicators. Additions to the brief included proposing a temporary 'Pod' to facilitate gatherings.
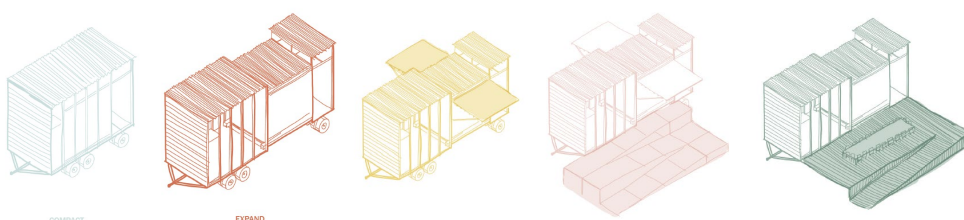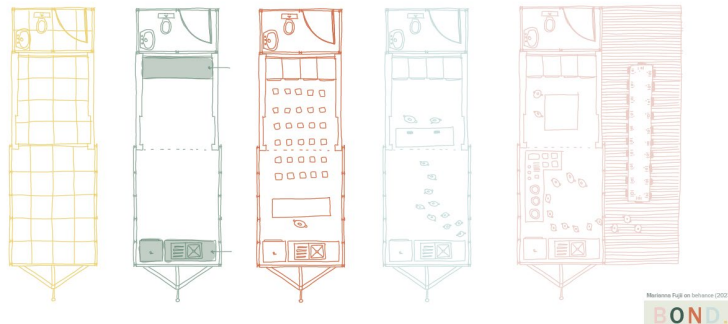

Figure 7: Taylor Cunningham work. (Above +next) Design for Social Impact (BOND design report GRAP3013 SP5 2023)

Five Key themes organized the engagement events by type as below across the seven processes of scoping, asking, proposing, refining, delivering, acting, and finally assessing/ evaluating.

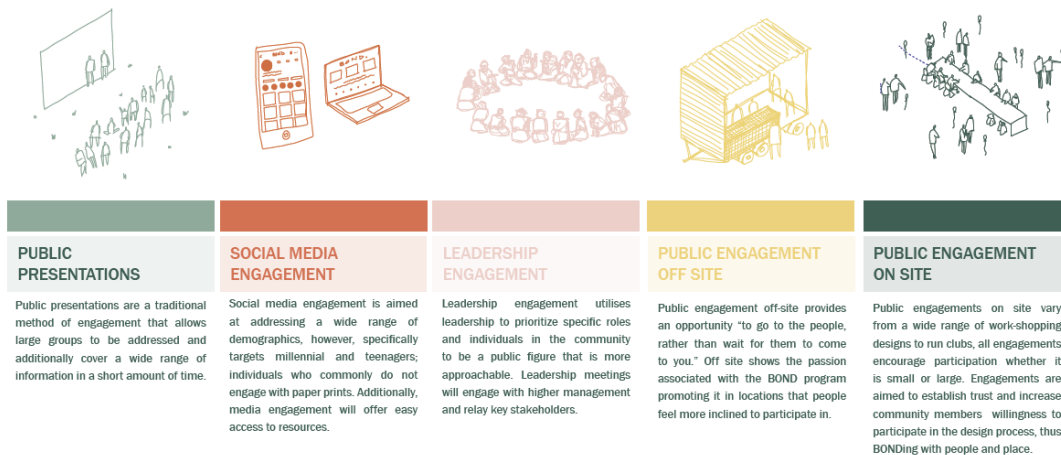| PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS	SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT	LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT	PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT OFF SITE	PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON SITE
Public presentations are a traditional method of engagement that allows large groups to be addressed and additionally cover a wide range of information in a short amount of time.	Social media engagement is aimed at addressing a wide range of demographics, however, specifically targets millennial and teenagers; individuals who commonly do not engage with paper prints. Additionally, media engagement will offer easy access to resources.	Leadership engagement utilises leadership to prioritize specific roles and individuals in the community to be a public figure that is more approachable. Leadership meetings will engage with higher management and relay key stakeholders.	Public engagement off-site provides an opportunity "to go to the people, rather than wait for them to come to you." Off site shows the passion associated with the BOND program promoting it in locations that people feel more inclined to participate in.	Public engagements on site vary from a wide range of work-shopping designs to run clubs, all engagements encourage participation whether it is small or large. Engagements are aimed to establish trust and increase community members willingness to participate in the design process, thus BONDing with people and place.

Figure 8: Taylor Cunningham work. (Above) Design for Social Impact (BOND design report GRAP 3013 SP5 2023)

As the themes above demonstrate engagement was planned to be both in person and online and both synchronous and asynchronous. Samples from dozens of engagement possibilities are below:
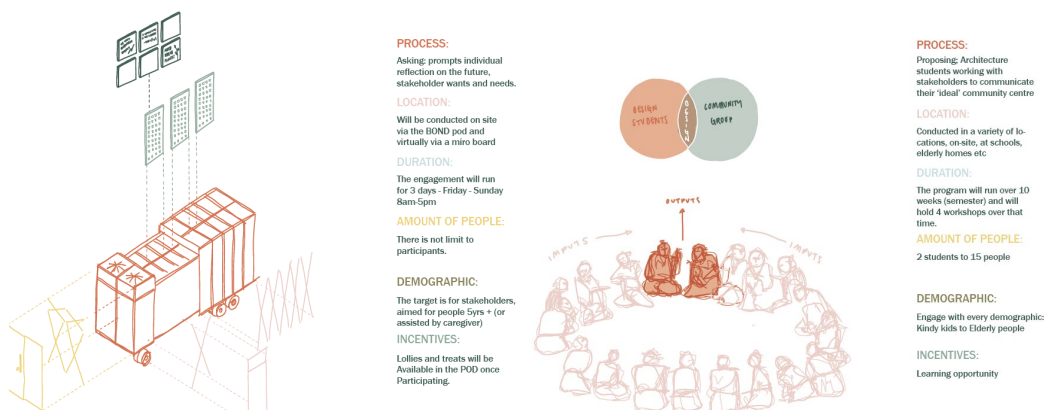

Figure 9: **Pin it:** interactive engagement onsite and online   **Design Your Ideal:** workshops to communicate the ingredients of an "ideal" community centre according to participants from the community

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Figure 10: **To the Point**: voting on the options to select priorities **Roll up Your Sleeves**: hands-on opportunities in construction and planting

Taylor planned for evaluation to occur three times during the sequence and included self-reflection from the delivery team as well as surveying participants.

Conclusion

The two courses referred to in this paper both deliberately exposed students to different procurement models and ways of working than the traditional form of design engagement. The studio and subsequent elective both required a speculative proposition aimed to engage them as agents of change needing to think in terms of systems and how to create societal change through their capacity as Architects. Both students whose work has been included in this paper, extended themselves in the studio project to include innovative program beyond what the brief required in order to catalyze community engagement and opportunities for connection and ultimately cohesion. The subsequent elective provided them opportunity for further stretch to consider not only the physical outcome of design but to carefully consider how the process they designed would help or hinder the social fabric that would sustain their community facility. Thus, the evidence from the student responses support the pedagogical aims for their learning. A year after taking the Design for Social Impact course, Taylor shared by email: *'I just wanted to say how grateful I am to have completed the social impact subject with you it's honestly helped a lot working in industry as I have already been able to implement a few things and recommend engagements specifically working with master planning engagements for a special needs school master plan I have been working on- So thank you for encouraging me and my friends to take the subject. '*. This and the previous response from Ella were satisfying and solid endorsements that these skills could inform systems change in practice as these graduates emerge into their careers in Architecture and that Regeneration can be delivered through closely considering design for social impact.

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Angelique Edmonds has a passion for design for social impact, sustainability and public engagement with diverse people regarding the decisions about place which impact their everyday lives. She is a Senior Lecturer in Architecture & Sustainable Design at UniSA, and founder and Creative Director of the School for Creating Change. In addition to over twenty years' experience as an academic and public engagement specialist, she has held a number of representative roles for AIA and AACA and taught in 4 different Australian Universities and studied PhD, M. Phil and degrees in Architecture in Sydney, London and Cambridge UK.