An Urban Room for Tyneside

An undergraduate design response to the Farrell Review’s call for every city to have an urban room

Dhruv Adam Sookhoo, Mark Tewdwr-Jones, Catherine Houston.
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An Urban Room for Tyneside was developed for delivery as part of the Bachelor in Architecture and Urban Planning with Honours, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University. The project is part of the legacy of the Newcastle City Futures project kindly supported by Newcastle University Institute of Social Renewal.

This report is intended for:
Policy makers, educators and researchers interested in introducing undergraduate architecture and planning students to contemporary policy recommendations through studio based design projects. The project was devised to enable students to explore and propose an urban room for Tyneside as a means of considering the alternative practices in architecture and planning and the venues that enhance civic engagement in the built environment.

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Sketch by Sam McDonough

Cover: Photographs of work by Boram Kwon, Christopher Hau, Sam McDonough, Alexander Mackay, Lok Hang Leung, Runyu Zhang, Lawrence Wong, Filip Ferkovic, Thasnia Haque and Jonas Grytnes.
Foreward

An Urban Room for Tyneside

The Newcastle City Futures multi-media exhibition and event series was created to promote a city-wide dialogue between communities, professionals, elected members, developers and key stakeholders through a more visual approach to communicating urban change and planning decision-making\(^1\). During nineteen late spring days over 2,400 people visited our pop-up urban room at Newcastle's historic Guildhall to participate in a conversation about the future of Newcastle, Gateshead and Tyneside beyond. Urban change and planning decision-making was made more accessible to a wider audience by presenting oral histories from community members, linking personal stories to previously unseen photographs, showing historic films and artefacts from living memory, and presenting models of built, unbuilt, demolished and imagined development and city plans. This inclusive, innovative format allowed participants to connect to the past, present and future of Tyneside, and support a well-informed debate about how Newcastle and Gateshead should develop over the next 50 years.

The Urban Room for Tyneside project is part of the legacy of Newcastle City Futures. The undergraduate project sees students exploring the design and participation dimensions of planning as part of the newly established joint architecture and urban planning degree. Developed by Dhruv Sookhoo, Design Advisor to Newcastle City Futures, and delivered alongside Cathy Houston, (Collective Architecture) and Joan Caba (Barcelona Metropolitan Council), the project draws on the rich practice knowledge generated by the Newcastle City Futures initiative.

Within the structured studio students are guided through a design scenario in which they imagine themselves as both the designers, and inaugural resident design advisor, to the North East’s first urban room to be sited on the Newcastle Quayside. It is exciting to think that so soon after delivering the Newcastle City Future exhibition it should be serving as a core precedent to enrich an interdisciplinary curriculum within the School. This valuable project is intended to increase student awareness of the power of multidisciplinary practice, community participation and effective championing of design quality to positively shape our cities and neighbourhoods. It comes at an early stage in their preparation as future built environment professionals and citizens, and I hope they are receptive to the underlying messages that drove the project’s development. Seen in the context of the Farrell Review’s recommendations our project is extremely timely, and I am delighted to bring it to the attention of a wider audience.\(^2\)

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The following students were awarded a Collective Architecture Prize: Urban Room in recognition of their commitment to the programme of study and their collegiate approach to studio work:

**Jonas Grytnes, Boram Kwon, Thasnia Haque, Christopher Hau, Manveer Phull, Alexander Robson**

We would like to thank all students for their participation in the project and we are especially pleased to include contributions from the following students in this publication:


**Editorial Team**

Dhruv Sookhoo  
Mark Tewdwr-Jones  
Cathy Houston

**Acknowledgements**

The editorial team would like to offer our thanks to **Tim Townshend** (Director of Planning and Urban Design, Newcastle University) and **Andy Law** (Degree Programme Director) for supporting the development of the Urban Room for Tyneside project.

We are grateful to the newly founded **Place Alliance Urban Room Network** for providing opportunities for reflection during project preparation, delivery and evaluation. Special thanks to the group’s chair **Carolyn Butterworth** (Director, Live Works, Sheffield University) and **Lucy Natarajan** (Place Alliance and University College London) for their inclusive approach and the potentials it opens up.

We are especially grateful to **Joan Caba** who delivered the project with us, **Daisy Froud** (University College London and Participation, Politics, Process) who provided valuable feedback and inspiration along the way, and **Boram Kwon** who volunteered to stay behind after the project was done to record the work of her fellow students.

The project is part of the legacy **Newcastle City Futures** project, kindly supported by **Newcastle University Institute of Social Renewal**.
Editorial Team

**Cathy Houston** is a practicing architect and founding member of Glasgow-based cooperative Collective Architecture. She is the lead consultant and designer on a variety of regeneration projects incorporating housing, retail, offices, community facilities, public realm improvements and lighting. Her clients have included major public bodies such as Glasgow Housing Association, Glasgow City Council. Her projects have received peer-recognition and her collaborative approach to design and attention to detail have been recognised by United Kingdom Women in Construction Awards who named her Architect of the Year (2012). Cathy is a graduate of Strathclyde University and has recently completed postgraduate studies in sustainable design at the University of Edinburgh.

**Dhruv Adam Sookhoo** is a chartered member of the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Royal Town Planning Institute with experience in residential design, design management, residential development and urban regeneration. He is a Visiting Lecturer and Economic and Social Research Council funded doctoral candidate at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, where his research and teaching explores the interprofessional perspectives and practices of architects and planners working to deliver residential design quality. He is a member of the influential RIBA Housing Group and an alumnus of Future of London’s London Leadership Programme. Dhruv acted as Design Advisor to the Newcastle City Futures exhibition, is a founding member of the Place Alliance’s Urban Room Network and project lead for the Urban Room for Tyneside student design project.

**Mark Tewdwr-Jones** is a Fellow of Royal Town Planning Institute, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. He is Professor of Town Planning, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University and as Director of Newcastle City Futures he successfully delivered the highly successful Newcastle City Futures exhibition and event series (2014), is Chair of the Newcastle City Futures Development Group and co-author of the Newcastle City Futures 2065: Anchoring Universities in Cities through Urban Foresight (2015).

Mark has acted as Government Advisor on planning, housing and land use to UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments, and lead expert for the Government Office for Science’s Foresight on land use futures and future of cities. Mark is passionate about dissemination and civic participation, and was curator of city and film sessions at Open City London Documentary Film Festival in 2011 and 2012.
Newcastle City Futures: People, Place, Change
Precedent for an Urban Room for Tyneside Project

The Newcastle City Futures exhibition served as principle precedent for an Urban Room for Tyneside Project. It was staged as a room within a room, formed by modular displays in trapezium form that defined a straight, walled outer space associated with debate and circulation, and a quieter inner space with gently sloping sides. Beyond practical considerations such as stability and relative ease of fabrication, the designers were inspired to create simple, easel-like stands by the social potential that visitors would come and display material that they themselves had generated, alongside formally presented pieces.

The geometric form of the stands offered opportunities to enhance the prominence of models by presenting them on stands that had seemingly toppled into the centre of the exhibition. This was intended as a playful gesture within the quiet economy of the exhibition and had the effect of framing models within the exhibition wall and visually positioning past and future proposals for the city against the views of the Quayside seen through the exhibition space’s large ‘windows’. This framing of models and aerial photography against views of current urban context was apt because it linked to the Newcastle City Future approach that signposted past and present developments and experiences to support the re-imagining of future urban development. Arguably, this was most clearly evidenced in relation to the presentation of Farrell’s Geordie Ramblas, which proposed new pedestrian routes through Newcastle city centre from the Town Moor to Gateshead’s Quayside in 2004 (lower right).

Newcastle City Futures: People, Place, Change: Precedent for Urban Room for Tyneside Project

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1. View over models to door © Newcastle City Futures
2. Trinity Square, Owen Luder © Newcastle City Futures
3. Children's Corner © Newcastle City Futures
4. Nexus Metro Extension Presentation © Newcastle City Futures
5. Interactive Board © Newcastle City Futures
6. Farrell Model © Dhruv Sookhoo

An Urban Room for Tyneside
Dhruv Sookhoo and Cathy Houston

An Urban Room for Tyneside project responds directly to the Farrell Review’s call for urban rooms in every town and city in England to act as multifunctional venues for exhibition, learning and community participation in place-based decision-making (Figure 1). Students were challenged to develop design proposals for Tyneside’s first dedicated, permanent centre for the promotion of civic engagement in urban change and placemaking. The structured undergraduate studio and the design process it facilitated acted as a vehicle for students to consider the social purpose of architecture, design and heritage dimensions of planning and how best to interpret and implement policies for enhanced community participation through the provision of new community spaces and city-wide initiatives between organisations.

The project was devised to provide our undergraduate students with insight into the complex, multidisciplinary, alternative design, planning and community practice being adopted to support civic participation at the neighbourhood and city-scale. As the students’ first extended undergraduate design project we felt that asking them to imagine how spaces would be used socially between designers and the communities during the design process was the most accessible way of introducing alternative practice given the limited experience of practice within the group. We set about creating and maintaining a realistic design scenario throughout the project to familiarise students with the typical format of University-based design project, simulate the designer-client relationship as it occurs in industry, and most importantly provide opportunities for students to critically reflect with experienced practitioners on how alternative the scenario and their practice was in relation to current practice norms. This approach is consistent with the aims of the School’s recently established Architecture and Urban Planning BA, which aims to develop graduates able to support advances in socially responsible practice through a grounding and critical appreciation of alternative approaches to design and placemaking.

Developing a Design Scenario
Over seven weeks students assumed the role of a newly appointed design advisor, jointly responsible to the local authorities on Tyneside for interpreting the urban room concept and translating it into a design and operational plan for a new civic building integrated public realm on the Newcastle Quayside (Figure 1). The design advisor would eventually work from the new community building, manage its facilities and event series and be charged with fostering greater civic and community engagement through its work. This dimension encouraged students to develop highly individual interpretation of the urban room concept and decision-making about what types of spaces and spatial relations would best enhance civic participation between individuals, communities and stakeholders.

The Trinity Chare infill site selected for the project is well-known to those who live and work on Tyneside. The site is characterised by the underlying, narrow medieval plot structure preserved through continued use of public chares and views over the Tyne southward to the Sage Gateshead. Strategically and symbolically the site for the new centre has been selected for its historic significance in the development of Newcastle and Gateshead, and its current proximity to the new institutions that have driven the culturally-led regeneration of the Quayside. At the beginning of the project the prominent gap site had stood vacant for decades and it appeared to be a stimulating context for students to consider how best to respond to the past, present and future of Newcastle and Gateshead, and the conurbation beyond.

Students were asked to justify their design proposals through the development of an individual brief and well-considered building programme based on their understanding of how the design advisor would act as an independent facilitator and leader once the new centre became operational. Design tutors adopted the role of commissioners from Newcastle City Council, Gateshead Metropolitan Council, North Tyneside and South Tyneside. Proposals were judged using criteria reflecting a concern for both the quality of the architectural design process and the potential for the resulting proposal to enrich place-based decision-making. For example, successful proposals considered diverse issues such as how best to integrate the use of interactive city-models into wider community engagement events, ways of reinterpreting the historic chares as a means of connecting urban change to heritage issues and the use of public realm to extend the centre’s social mission onto the street.

“Every town and city... should have an “urban room” where the past, present and future of that place can be inspected. In Japan they are a mix of display and meeting places... Urban rooms should be connected to and supported by regional branches of PLACE institutions and agencies and could be branded with the name of that place (“Place Space: Sheffield” or “Place Space: Reading”, for example)\(^2\).

Figure 1: Situating an Urban Room for Tyneside

“Elaboration of the Farrell Review’s urban room concept though consensus as part of the Place Alliance’s Urban Room Network Meeting (Live Works, Sheffield University, 16 July 2015), and a specific context for translation of concept on Tyneside.”

Defining a Project Brief

Defining a detailed brief for the urban room situated the student project within an ongoing discussion within the academic and practitioner communities that is currently seeking to define the social purpose and potential of urban rooms. Most notable is the Place Alliance’s Urban Room Working Group, which has established broad consensus that such venues should serve as spaces for public deliberation enabling communities to take ownership, think critically about the creation and running of places, and develop place leadership expertise.

As a newly established concept there are few purpose built, well-documented urban rooms for students to draw on as precedents. In addition to the Newcastle City Futures exhibition and event series, perhaps the best known design-focused community venues fulfilling the role of an urban room, include:

- **New London Architecture**, a member-funded organisation for the promotion of discussion and debate about architecture, planning, development and construction. The organisation runs a vibrant event series and regular ideas competitions to develop insight into how to address London’s problems and realise its opportunities. The organisation manages a public display, which centres on an interactive model of the capital (Figure 2).  

- **Blackburn is Open**, an arts-led regeneration centre working closely with Blackburn with Darwen Council to revitalise Blackburn Town Centre. It hosts an ongoing series of community organised events related to making, placemaking and city branding within under-used spaces and empty shops in the town centre. This has included the use of live, three dimensional printing to support communities to reimagine and reinterpret existing places.

- **Lighthouse, Glasgow**, Scotland’s national centre for Design and Architecture, which acts as a visitor centre, exhibition space and city-centre events venue. It hosts Architecture + Design Scotland, the nation’s champion for good design and sustainable places and regularly contributes to civic participation through a vibrant programme of public exhibitions.

Without an established, published typology individual students were challenged to interpret the urban room as a new concept, and prepare and defend their project brief by revisiting and reconsidering more conventional, potentially less accessible spaces of public display and professional decision-making. For example, public libraries, art galleries, council offices, community centres, municipal parks, visitor centres, and the planner’s office, architect’s studio, member committee room, developer’s portacabin, activist’s lodge, etc.

To support students to develop a workable brief, reflecting current thinking in community-focused design practice we supplied a set a functional requirements and introduced them to potential modes of alternative practice through lectures and during design tutorials. We envisaged a relatively cost-effective, civic venue and we advised that public accommodation and the Design Advisor’s private accommodation should be no more than 90m2 and 30m2 respectively. We suggested that public accommodation should include: a community space with direct connections to public space and the street beyond, a small library with access to internet to allow the public to review policy documents, a stand large enough to display a model of Tyneside, and a projector to allow presentations and interaction with virtual models. The Design Advisor’s accommodation was presented as a place of calm to plan work with the community. This guidance was presented as a point of departure and students were encouraged to test and modify the original brief as their design process matured.

Of paramount importance was the idea that the urban room should be welcoming and students should demonstrate sensitivity to social, as well as, physical barriers experienced by different members of society. We encouraged students to consider the new centre as a place of dialogue in which architects, planners, developers and decision-makers displayed proposals and research to communicate, engage and make decisions with communities and civic stakeholders. This avoided the urban room being interpreted as merely a place for the celebration of architects, planners and developers, and their achievements.

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5 Blackburn is Open. (2015) Blackburn is Open [Online- Internet]. Available at: http://blackburnisopen.co.uk/ (accessed: August 2015)
Figure 2: **Existing Urban Room Precedents**

Existing UK urban room precedents include: New London Architecture’s member-funded display, which is centred on an interactive model of the capital (1:1500, 12m long), and Open Blackburn’s arts-led regeneration centre and the Lighthouse, Glasgow.
Work by Boram Kwon, Christopher Hau, Sam McDonough, Alexander Mackay, Lok Hang Leung
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Interpreting the Urban Room

Our students’ work is significant because it is among the first contributions to fully explore the concept of the urban room through the design process, and consider the social purpose and spatial potentials of such venues as vehicles for enhanced community and civic engagement with place-based decision-making. Developing from the Newcastle City Futures exhibition and event series the project goes some way to demonstrate the capacity of teaching within a research intensive, civic university to support undergraduate students to critically evaluate current practice and engage in advances in future practice that offer architects, planners, developers and decision-makers with mechanisms to collaborate with communities and civic institutions to realise better places.

Capturing the response of students so soon after entry onto a deliberatively multidisciplinary course is particularly important because it provides a perspective on how the next generation of built environment practitioners and urban citizens may interpret the mission of urban rooms, the mandate of practitioners who collaborate with communities within them, and the form these new venues should take to better equip communities and stakeholders to envisage and deliver our future cities.

To structure student reflection on these issues during the design process we set three questions:

- How will my scheme be used by the communities who use it?
- How will my scheme be used by me as Tyneside’s Design Advisor?
- How will these two requirements direct the design of my scheme? (For example, built form or how functions relate to external spaces?).

As members of a new project assembled to facilitate student learning through what must have been a complicated design process, we found our students’ responses to these questions to be varied, innovative and refreshingly free from the dogma that can constrain established practice. As experienced practitioners we found collaborating with the year group thoroughly enjoyable and punctuated with opportunities for reflection on our role as practitioners and educators interested in socially responsible, community-orientated practice. The quality of the shared learning experience between students and educators is hard to capture, but we are very pleased to share a sample of our students’ work and we hope you find it as rewarding to review as we did to support its development.

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8 For accompanying teaching, learning and assessment material used to structure the Urban Room for Tyneside project see Sookhoo, D.A. (2015) An Urban Room for Tyneside: Teaching, learning and assessment material for an undergraduate design project in response to the Farrell Review’s call for every city to have an urban room, Newcastle Institute for Social Renewal, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne.