

Title: THE G.R.A.D. PROGRAMME: AN ALTERNATIVE FORM OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

What is GRADs?

The Northern Architecture Graduate Retention And Development (G.R.A.D.) Programme commenced in January 2010 in response to the difficulty which many architecture graduates were having in securing relevant work post-Part I and Part II.

The aims of the G.R.A.D. Programme are to: -

1. Improve the graduates' portfolios and CVs and aid their prospects for full time employment,
2. Benefit the graduates directly from the experience growing in knowledge, confidence, skills and learning from each other,
3. Benefit the region from the graduates' speculative efforts identifying problems that might have a design-based solution,
4. Develop opportunities which could lead to funded work – either for the Programme's participants or for local practitioners.

This paper will describe the inception and development of the Programme, as well as some of the challenges faced by the founders/ mentors. It will conclude, placing the Programme into a broader, socio-economic framework suggesting its future direction.

How did it start?

Graduates who had contacted Northern Architecture, the North East Regional Architecture Centre, about work experience were invited to a meeting in the studio of +3 Architecture (+3A) in November 2009 and asked if they would be interested in participating in an alternative type of practice. This was the first time all three mentors met and we tabled our preconceptions and aspirations for what became the G.R.A.D. Programme: -

- An alternative form of “year out” experience providing a forum for support and assistance from their peers; working collectively on “live” projects, competitions, and self-generated briefs which identify problems that might have design-based solutions.
- A “hothouse” for graduates wanting to start their own businesses. For example, by developing, testing and marketing a project which had started as a brief in the G.R.A.D. Programme.
- An opportunity to “design and build” small projects, similar to Die Baupiloten at the Berlin Technical University [1].
- An informal, or collectively-run, employment agency – allowing the participants to promote themselves to potential employers

through a website and acting as a pool of architectural “temps” for local practices requiring particular skills for short term contracts.

Recognising a lot of the participants may be in part-time employment and that the ultimate objective was for them to find relevant paid work, the participants (known as GRADs) are free to commit as much time to the programme as they feel able and to stay involved as long as they find it useful, interesting and convenient so to do.

Alternative models

Around the time the G.R.A.D. Programme commenced, other proposals were announced to address the dearth of employment opportunities affecting recent architecture graduates which, superficially, offered similar experiences.

R.I.B.A. Host Programme

The R.I.B.A. Host Programme [2] proposed practices making redundancies offer surplus workstation space to graduates. This would not be an internship, although the graduate would enter into a three months’ agreement with the Practice in which they had to detail the work they proposed to undertake during the residency. The graduate would benefit from facilities available in the Practice, including use of licensed software, the experience of being in an office environment and mentoring from the Host Practice.

This relies on the graduate having already secured or devised work to be undertaken during a fixed period.

Potentially the graduate could be quite isolated, neither being integrated fully into the host office nor having connections to a wider, peer-support network.

Chetwood Associates’ “Green Room”

In May 2010, Chetwood Associates [3] announced their window space would be made available to student groups to display their work. They also offered access to six computer workstations in their entrance lobby for a one week period. Birmingham City’s and Oxford Brookes’ School of Architecture have used the window, although only one student, Cait Sweeney, has displayed her work there independently [4].

Addressing initial scepticism

In foreseeing that the G.R.A.D. Programme could be perceived negatively, we were careful to address potential misconceptions from the outset. We agreed upon and published criteria by which projects would be selected. Priority would be afforded to briefs with the potential to develop into projects which otherwise would not be viable. Projects should: -

- not exploit the participants’ voluntary labour nor undercut or take work away from other professionals/ local practices
- provide learning opportunities for the graduates
- be relevant, interesting and challenging
- produce tangible results for the participants

Crucially though, at the stage they become a brief for the G.R.A.D. Programme, these are not projects

which could, or would, be undertaken by commercial architectural practices. The GRADs' develop the client's requirements to the stage where grant applications or fund-raising can begin, essentially, filling a "consultancy gap".

Local practices

Several local practices with good working relationships with Northern Architecture were supportive of the Programme and recognised the advantages which the "temp pool" of architecture graduates offered to them, particularly in times of recession. These practices were requested to add contact details for the G.R.A.D. Programme to reply letters to unsuccessful job applicants. This widened awareness of the programme to students and graduates originally from the North East who had studied elsewhere.

Local Universities

Northumbria and Newcastle Universities (the local universities with architecture courses) were ambivalent about the Programme at first. We secured an initial seed fund of £200 from the (then) School of Built Environment at Northumbria University and approached Newcastle University for a matching sum; a further contribution of £250 was received from each after 18 months. This ensures participation in the Programme does not financially disadvantage the participants. Notionally, it represents an investment of less than £15 per GRAD.

It was a deliberate decision at the outset to make the Programme a Northern Architecture project. Independence from both local

universities ensures equal access to all graduates. Public liability and professional indemnity insurances were also provided under NA's existing arrangements.

P.E.D.R.

Newcastle University first recognised the Programme could contribute to the participants' Professional Experience and Development Record (P.E.D.R.). Currently Newcastle, Northumbria, Leeds Metropolitan and Huddersfield Universities have all agreed to accept 20 certified hours per week from the G.R.A.D. Programme as contributing up to three months experience. The actual take-up by participants, however, has been lower than expected with only four GRADs registering their PEDR to date.

The first cohort

The first cohort had all been seeking Part I positions for around six months when the G.R.A.D. Programme commenced in January 2010. The cohort consisted of six graduates from Newcastle University and three graduates from Northumbria University, although two of the Northumbria students found EU-funded Internships shortly afterwards. The GRADs were all working on a single, large project at this time - the production of the "Gateshead Creative Quarter" report for 1NG, a City Development Company created by Newcastle and Gateshead Councils. This report took a number of months to complete and first identified some of the problems around time-management and documentation discussed later.

Shared experiences of long periods of unemployment, being amongst the first to join the Programme (and to create its identity), together with the mutual effort of producing a single project, had a strong bonding effect for this cohort. When any took a paid architectural position and left the Programme, it significantly affected the morale of the remaining group and had a noticeable, negative impact on their work rate.

After the first cohort

The second cohort joined the programme between July and December 2010. When the new recruits joined, only three of the original cohort remained (one had had a month's paid work for +3A). There were now a number of projects and the experience and background of the participants were diversifying – with Part II architecture graduates, an interior designer and postgraduate planning and urban design students also joining the Programme.

The self-conscious identification by the GRADs of themselves as a singular group, observed of the first cohort, did not re-emerge. Amongst the participants in this second cohort, there was however, a much greater emphasis on the social aspects of group membership and the first “GRAD socials” were organised. We also began to see a greater “churn” in the numbers of participants joining for shorter periods, with graduates who had been studying at either Northumbria or Newcastle University returning to live in their hometowns with parents when the term of their rented accommodation expired. There seemed to be a slight upturn in

job prospects, with more of the participants finding paid work quicker.

Projects and Clients

The majority of the projects undertaken by the GRADs have been “live” briefs. To date, these have predominantly been developed from existing contacts.

These include the education pavilion for the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art – who were seeking design ideas for a bespoke, demountable structure instead of hiring marquees commercially for events and weddings - commissioned by Emma Thomas, Head of Learning and Engagement. Emma is also on the board of trustees of Northern Architecture.

With cuts in the Arts Council’s grants, the Baltic Flour Mills Visual Arts Trust was unable to continue the project beyond outline design stage. With their encouragement however, GRAD Albert Kamara has worked with +3A and structural engineer, Marc Horn of Studio Horn Engineering Design, to develop a design to the point where it can be prototyped. Using their expertise, the Trust will work with Albert to identify and apply for research and development funds under their charitable remit [5].

Northern Architecture (NA) has also provided a backbone of activities to the Programme. The GRADs have volunteered for NA projects to work with school children and community groups, to stage a public event at the Newcastle-Gateshead Bridges Festival and provide walking tours for the North East Festival of Architecture.

Managing Workloads

During the recession, in common with architectural practices, there has not been a consistent “live” workload for the G.R.A.D. Programme. We also have to manage a constantly variable workforce often with commitments in part-time, paid employment, typically in service sector jobs.

Competitions and self-generated briefs have been used to match workload to the number of active participants. Implicit in self-generated briefs is the objective of creating publicity about the Programme by highlighting a particular issue with a creative or design solution.

In the first twelve months there was a steep learning curve for the G.R.A.D. mentors. Our initial, optimistic assumptions were that the participants would be able to organise themselves, manage their time, and seek out or develop their own project briefs, before we realised the majority of participants have neither the skills nor the experience to take over this level of management. Following that realisation, there was a slower development of robust procedures to ensure that the Programme functions. These mirror procedures found in practice but have been made explicit as checklists.

Project Champions

Following the decision that management of the Programme had to remain with the mentors, responsibility for individual projects was devolved to the participants. The idea of Project Champions evolved organically, probably because of a number of Part II graduates in the

second cohort willing to take on a lead role. The Project Champions are self-selecting or, where more than one GRAD volunteers, selected by the team interested in working on a particular brief. A GRAD ought to be Project Champion for only one project at a time, although they may also be contributing to a number of other projects.

The Champion’s role is largely administrative. They produce preparatory documents - consolidating the brief, developing a project programme and a proforma document for the design report. They arrange studio times for the team to work together and then report on progress at mentoring and client meetings. Whilst they become the main point of contact for that project, the GRAD ethos is to encourage teamwork.

Charrettes and teamwork

To accelerate progress and to reinvigorate the GRADs’ enthusiasm for a long project, one of the first tactics employed during the “Gateshead Creative Quarter” project, was the design charrette. With a tightly focused brief, the work was completed individually and presented to the cohort in a short, set time period. This practice has become an integral, early stage in the design process for most projects. Now described as a competition, rather than a charrette, participants are given one or two weeks in which to produce individual responses. The brief for these competitions is now left deliberately loose, allowing individuals to respond to the shared information in a variety of ways.

Individual responses are tabled for discussion by the cohort at the mentoring meetings. Common or compatible ideas are identified for progression as a team proposal, or alternative responses are re-presented to show to the client as options. The client's feedback then informs the team's design. This process produces propositions over which the whole team feels ownership. It often produces unexpected results thus creating a useful, critical distance from the process for the architect mentors.

Teamwork... requires much social intelligence and frequent restraint of one's ego in decision-making processes... In return for the reduced appearance of ego, each team member is equally involved in the success of a project and in the symbolic capital connected with it. [6]

Teamwork is expedient in pooling ideas to accelerate the design process. Equally, it means the whole body of work for a given project is available for each GRAD to include in their personal portfolio to demonstrate team working, people management and negotiation skills as well as their design ability.

Managing documenting projects

The process of recording the development of a project is essential in managing projects when the groups' participants change. It also ensures that the work produced is "portfolio-ready" and accessible if invited to an interview at short notice.

We have experienced an inherent resistance amongst architecture graduates to documenting their work

adequately as it progresses. It appears to be perceived as a misuse of time that could be spent producing new work. The constant challenge is to ensure that neither work underway, nor completed projects, are "lost" – either because a participant fails to back up their files or because they do not copy the projects onto the GRAD hard drive before they leave the Programme.

GRADmag

The GRADmag began as a means of recording aspects of the participant's interests and experiences which were not part of the projects, and to encourage recording of work in progress. It was also intended to promote the Programme to other unemployed graduates and to students in their final years of study. It has not always been easy to recruit editors from the GRADs, but four issues have been produced to date (September 2010, December 2010, October 2011 and January 2012). Issue #3 was re-printed by National Building Specification and with their sponsorship, circulation of GRADmag has been extended to practices in the region and to past and present clients.

A practice of peers?

Initially we tried to describe what we were doing in the terms of an architectural practice but were unable to identify the core business activity which would make the Programme self-sustaining without contradicting our project selection criteria. However, the aims of the G.R.A.D. Programme allow for a further re-framing, which might suggest an alternative, post-recession way to practice architecture.

The G.R.A.D. Programme enables a geographically “local cluster” of architecture graduates and related disciplines to develop a collegiate approach to professional practice with peer to peer co-operation and support.

In all successful and growing regional economies... [clusters] play a crucial role in driving productivity, innovation and competitiveness. [7]

Creating shared-value

The concept of shared-value, proposed by Harvard’s Professor Mark Porter and Mark Kramer [8], redefines the concept of the “value-added” by businesses, to include the societal benefits, relative to their costs, not just their net profits (i.e. revenues minus costs incurred). In their analysis, during the “red in tooth and claw” capitalism of the previous two decades, business was perceived as standing outside of society. Profits were made at the expense of their customers, employees and suppliers through redundancies, relocation to lower-cost regions of the world and price competition. Societal benefits provided by business were merely in providing employment and paying taxes. However, shared-value recognises that societal harms can also be intrinsically damaging to businesses, for instance in wasted energy and raw materials, accidents, or the need for remedial training. Addressing these can lead to innovation, increased productivity and expand opportunities for value creation.

By filling the “consultancy gap”, the GRADs disseminate their knowledge into the community and, through their efforts, new opportunities are identified. These benefit: -

- the client and community – who are better able to articulate their collective needs or ambitions to funding bodies and to their consultants,
- the GRADs themselves – who gain relevant experience and further their professional education, making contacts out with the narrow confines of their peer group, and potentially,
- other professionals and practices, for whom new projects have been conjured up and who will be able to work with a better-informed client and a defined brief.

Conclusion

The G.R.A.D. Programme creates the physical, virtual (through social media) and psychological environment in which emerging professionals can begin to form a network of peers with whom they can collaborate on a project-by-project basis. This demonstrates, at least the possibility of, a more proactive alternative to the commercial architectural model of the last two decades. The Baltic Pavilion project hints at the hybrid for-profit/not-for-profit organisations which could be generated by a shared-value approach, fulfilling our original aspirations for the G.R.A.D. Programme. This would be a positive legacy to arise from the current recession.

Addendum

In August 2012, we were invited to make a presentation to MADE, the Architecture Centre for the West Midlands, during which a new G.R.A.D. franchise was started. The initial cohort comprised of 4 graduates from Birmingham City and 1 graduate from Sheffield University.

In October they moved out of the MADE office and into space provided by Bryan Priest Newman.

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