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Transformational Involvement

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The original Transformational Involvement brief's aim was to communicate the breadth and nature of all the Rising Stars projects and the wider Curtain Rises Project to visitors and the wider community.

“A design proposition to engage communities and visitors through a pivotal device to disseminate knowledge and awareness of the transformational activity, legacy and spirit of place at Seaton Delaval Hall”

The ambition of the brief was matched by the complexity of its aim - to disseminate information on the design outcomes from each of the Rising Stars projects within a single method or device, when many of the projects were still in their infancy, or yet to commence. The design novelty of the proposal would also support communities by maintaining their engagement with Seaton Delaval Hall during a period of intensive conservation work on site. It was of huge importance to the National Trust that visitors and the wider community were kept informed on activities and developments as they happened, to maintain community investment in the Curtain Rises Project and to allow informed, continuous access to the site during periods of investment works. The National Trust was also keen to explore new ways to communicate and involve audiences with the changes taking place around them, in keeping with its *Spirit of Place* (a shared understanding of what is unique, distinctive and cherished; the enduring qualities that make a place special). The property began a series of engagement opportunities for visitors in late 2018, including guided tours to provide access to areas otherwise closed off during the conservation work, events for Heritage Open Days, and connection points with key consultants and contractors involved in the project.

Interior Architecture students from Northumbria University were asked to develop ideas for the brief, and to support the property team to better share information, involve communities with the programme of events/activities planned, and to increase awareness of the transformations taking place at Seaton Delaval Hall, through their ideas. This brief asked students to consider how best to engage people in the wider project, as part of the project, and in ways which would depend on content being developed in other streams of the programme and by the property team. The brief also contained an ask for ***“on and off site ‘pop ups’ to explain the work being undertaken to visitors”*** which added a degree of transportability or flexibility to the design challenge.

This was the area in which student involvement was going to be most beneficial and it provided an opportunity to explore options for an information hub, or hubs, on site. In late 2018, the first iteration of the brief therefore concentrated on designing the interior of a temporary facility already on site, which would become the ‘Project Hub’ and act as an introduction into the extent of collaborative projects being undertaken within Rising Stars and the range of developments intended within the Curtain Rises works. A recently graduated BA (Hons) Interior Architecture student was engaged to design the Project Hub and exhibition intervention for an existing building on site, with support from the Northumbria University lead, to act as a visitor engagement space.

This was then realised by a specialist gallery fit-out contractor. The Project Hub was well used as a base for volunteers and staff to welcome visitors and begin tours, to explain the project developments, house interpretation panels showing project timelines and key messaging, show samples of materials used in the conservation work, and showcase films.

However, it was always understood that this facility would be temporary, and an alternative method was needed to fulfil the same functions as the Hub on a more focused and lasting basis, but which could also be flexible in location, as areas of the site closed and re-opened in response to the conservation works. This was the design brief presented to Year 2 BA (Hons) Interior Architecture students in the first term of the 2019 - 20 academic year, with the title 'Project 2.1 anti_story' reflecting the reflexive nature of the brief to explain wider project outputs through a project output.

“A method by which content developed during the project can be communicated to visitors and non-visitors, both on and off site, in a ‘pop up’ format”.

The students visited the Hall for a presentation by National Trust staff and to view some of the spaces which might be used for the eventual solution, which was the first challenge for the students. With disruptive works ongoing, the intention was to deliver a form that could be moved around the site as needed. However, the ideas needed to be based in actual spaces, and so a selection of rooms had to be identified as possible locations, even though it was not yet known which might be available at particular times.

The interventions had to account for the requirements of working in a listed building, i.e. no alterations or fixings to any of the existing structures, and the students were also asked to decide how content would be communicated (text, graphics, physical objects, or digital forms) without knowing exactly what the content would be. This was also a challenging brief for the National Trust leads to communicate, and so they attended a number of student workshops as the concepts were being developed to inform the process. The iterative nature of the design process was paralleled by the open and developmental nature of the brief making, with an outcome emerging that was collaborative, impactful and combined positive reaction from the students and space for brief definition for the property team.

Students presented their final concepts to the property General Manager in January 2020, with one selected to proceed to completion. The selected project envisaged a wooden structure with varying levels and intersections that reflected the surfaces and angles of the Hall's architecture and acted as a metaphor for the Delaval family's well documented playfulness. Although the ambition within the full concept was beyond the scope of the project to deliver, the project had potential to be refined without diluting the well-received provocation. The National Trust responded to its key elements; the ask from the 'client' was that the form be split into detachable parts and made to a more intimate scale; for people to be able to sit on/under the bench surfaces suggested; to take in both the surroundings and the information presented to them, and with sections developed to offer differing kinds of interaction. A small group of shortlisted students from the year group were selected to refine the design with support provided by the Northumbria University leads and with invaluable professional input from GT3 Architects on a voluntary basis. This collaboration, between academia,

practice, and the National Trust, allowed the students to produce a real life, authentic design delivery package, developing budget-based design adaptation, specification and completion, whilst learning, in real time, to negotiate with clients, contractors and project stakeholders and improve their transferable skills as future professionals.

“My design was inspired by the playfulness and trickery of the Delaval family, who lived in Seaton Delaval Hall in the 18th century. I wanted to provide a space for visitors to sit and dwell within the structure. The seats therefore follow the natural folds of origami, enabling visitors to interact and engage with the structure”

Student feedback

The evolution of the design was influenced by the budget available, and this limited the number and form of the eventual individual units proposed. Along with inherent practicalities around moving the pieces around the historic site, the scheme eventually resulted in three pieces, as sections from the original intervention, being fabricated. The students were active participants in the resolution, responded positively to suggestions and critique and worked collaboratively within a programme that aimed to appoint a contractor and fabricate the units by June 2020. However, in April of that year and with the outbreak of Covid-19, work on the brief was paused before any financial resource could be committed: it was unclear how the project might proceed with the uncertainty around lockdown conditions, and it was unclear under what circumstances visitors might return to Seaton Delaval Hall.

At this point there was a significant risk that the brief would have to stop entirely. However, by the winter of 2020 and with social distancing protocols in place, the National Trust was able to re-connect with the University, the students, and GT3, and a window of opportunity opened for delivery in the spring of 2021. Following a procurement process, Raskl were commissioned as a specialist contractor to deliver the final design and fabrication of the display units, in ongoing consultation with the team as a further project stakeholder, and the design was finalised so that it too could adapt to the changing social distancing requirements and dovetail within the timescales for spaces to be available. Delivery was scheduled for the summer of 2021, and due to a further small delay due circumstances outside the brief, in September of that year they were installed on the visitor route.

The look-and-feel of the design was modified from the original scheme to deliberately assimilate with the materiality and language of the earlier Project Hub and as reflected in other project-specific interventions on site, to provide a common visual style for visitors during the project. The original concept reflected the architecture of the Hall in the angles chosen, and this was successfully realised in the final pieces in a manner that would continue to be meaningful wherever they were situated within Seaton Delaval Hall or within a broader community context. The integration of media panels has developed a flexibility in how content is communicated and has developed legacy potential for the scheme to be useable beyond Rising Stars. The display units have proved popular with visitors and are adaptable, with changing content and locations to fit with other interpretation at the property.

The film in the Saloon contributed to dwell time. Guests who began to watch tended to stay for the whole loop, showing that the content was engaging.

“I didn’t realise how much work had actually gone into the restoration before I watched the video ... I was also interested to see how students were involved.”

(Extracts from evaluator interim report, 19 January 2022)

With restrictions on social contact continuing, there was a deliberate move towards digital content on site and short films were created to showcase the specialist conservation work being undertaken. The pieces have also been used to support exhibitions of work from other Rising Stars projects and in doing so, fulfil the original criteria for a flexible, ‘pop up’, solution to engagement.

The student whose concept was chosen and who worked with GT3 Architects to refine the design, has now found employment with the firm following graduation from the BA Interior Architecture programme. Another student who worked on the project and was part of the collaborative design team, has had their work recognised by the Jonathon Spiers Scholarship Award. The project was a significant catalyst for their academic development and their continued successes are a true measure of the success of the Rising Stars projects and their contribution to the Transformational Involvement brief. The project provided students with access to real-world insights that improved their learning experience and ultimately, their employability, manifest in the fact that the lead student was employed by GT3 Architects as a designer upon her graduation. GT3 Architects guided the students through client meetings, design detailing, budget, and fabrication decisions and the lead student is without doubt a more informed and accomplished designer thanks to this collaborative project experience.

“Working on this project and with GT3 really opened my eyes to the architectural world and gave me an insight into the real-life workings of a creative project. It has been such a rewarding experience and having my design chosen has given me a huge confidence boost, building not only my creative confidence but also my communication skills and knowledge.”

Student feedback

