The Almshouse Reimagined: challenging students in creating community

Alison Pooley[1] and Annabel Brown[2]

[1] Department of Engineering and the Built Environment, Faculty of Science and Technology, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, United Kingdom, alison.pooley@anglia.ac.uk;

[2] Annabel Brown Architect, High Street, Maldon, United Kingdom, info@annabel-brown.com

Abstract: For the past three years the authors of this paper have run a design project for second year architecture students entitled the Almshouse Reimagined. This collaborative project was proposed to studio tutors by a local almshouse charity to engage the next generation of architects in the social, political, and economic landscape of housing. The Almshouse Reimagined brief challenged students to rethink housing by designing a prototype Almshouse for Essex, questioning the housing needs of the local and wider community, and considering the opportunities presented by an ageing population. The challenge of the brief for second year architecture students should not be underestimated. The project constraints varied over the three years as did the site, a key constant being how do we create opportunities to build community. This paper explores how, through examining the almshouse typology in the early stage of their education, students are engaged in the pressing issues of our time, housing and the ageing population, whilst designing affordable homes that are protected from the ravages of the free market rented sector.

Keywords: Almshouse, community, housing

Introduction

On a cold day in early February 2015 second year architecture students studying in Essex were introduced to their design project brief for the forthcoming semester –The Almshouse Reimagined, a collaboration between the local school of architecture undergraduate course and the newly established almshouse charity, the Legacy East Almshouse Partnership (LEAP, n.d.). LEAP were keen to engage local architecture students in a design exercise that explored a prototype almshouse for Essex. Having a prototype almshouse presented the charity with an opportunity to use the proposals to test new sites with new communities and local planning authorities. For the studio tutors is represented an opportunity to get students thinking and designing for a client with constraints that were tangible, whilst engaging in wider societal debates focused on an ageing population and the housing crisis. The latter being more pertinent and immediate for students.

During the three years of running the project, during 2015, 2016 and 2017, the students and staff worked closely with the chair, vice-chair, and trustees of LEAP but also with almshouse residents, wardens, and the local community. Creating community is one of the challenges of a brief such as this, and the students responded by creating opportunities for sitting with views out across landscaped areas, quiet pedestrian routes, places to meet neighbours or talk over the garden fence in communal gardens, allotments, and outdoor rooms for afternoon tea. Before expanding further on the project outcomes it is worth placing the almshouse in context, and outlining how it differs from other housing types.

A potted history of the almshouse

In his 1955 text, Godfrey (1955) sets out the history and development of the almshouse from the medieval hospital. He draws attention to their architectural merit as well as their social history describing almshouses as "remarkable buildings, provided from a remote period for housing the needy and the aged" (Godfrey, 1955: 7) and that they "seldom lacked architectural merit and some of them were magnificent monuments of design and craftsmanship" (Godfrey, 1955: 15). This is where most people place the almshouse, a small, often elaborately crafted dwelling forming courtyards or quadrangles or a neat row of two or three in a quiet country village.

The almshouse is not unique to the UK and shares its history with the hofje (small courtyard house) of the Netherlands (Wilms Floet, 2016), and with the beguinage of the Low Countries. The roots of all these sit in philanthropy. The medieval response to those in need manifested in cloistered hospitals with refectories, chapels and modest dormitories. This continued throughout the centuries, as the need changed the typology largely did not, almshouses retaining many similar patterns of development as the early medieval plan. By the turn of the nineteenth century provision of housing for those in 'need' had developed, and continued to do so through philanthropic acts and utopian ambitions such as those of Octavia Hill and Joseph Rowntree. This provision developed from philanthropy to local authority, and led to what we now know as 'affordable housing', which used to be called social housing, and prior to that was just good old council housing. Worpole (2015) provides a concise history of the utopian dream of a planned society and its housing in his essay for the Swedenborg society, this is given as a key text to each student at the start of the project.

The merit of social housing and the concept of 'need', or the idea of the 'deserving poor' is not to be debated here other than to acknowledge that almshouses did exert control over their beneficiaries, with praise to the benefactor at worship on a Sunday often being compulsory. Many of the almshouses had additional restrictions on lifestyle – no drinking, no men, no women – and often required the residents to wear a uniform. The Royal Hospital Chelsea (left in legacy by Charles II) still does, and retains 'hospital' in its title, connecting it to its medieval roots. Chelsea, as with nearly all almshouses, has a restrictive admissions policy. Restrictions on who is eligible to become a resident of an almshouse range from; age - over 50 (or over 65 in the case of Chelsea), geography – having to be resident in an area for a certain period of time, or occupation – housing for retired teachers, carpenters, seamen. These restrictions on allocation of the houses are often borne out of the legacy of the benefactor. The distinction between being a resident as opposed to a tenant is crucial in almshouses, where residents pay a contribution to weekly maintenance rather than rent, and the charity is a registered provider rather than the landlord. The significance of this is discussed later in terms of contemporary issues.

A commonality among almshouses is that they provide housing for those in need in perpetuity, providing security and an ongoing potential to build community connections. This need for security and community remains evident today, and not just in terms of housing. As Godfrey (1955) highlights, with a population of only four million the medieval built response to 'need' was astonishing when compared with government responses to the current housing crisis housing and a population at just over sixty-five million.

Three projects and three years

Given such a rich and long history, the opportunity to work with a local charity to explore the almshouse typology further through a student project was exciting, especially when cast against the backdrop of the current housing crisis in the rented sector, the ageing population, and increase in single person households. In 2016, around 7.7 million people lived alone in the UK, the majority were women (ONS, 2016). The students, in the second year of their undergraduate degree, were faced by social and community aspects of the projects, this embedded them in current issues whilst simultaneously calling on a 1000 year old history. This section outlines the three projects undertaken over the past three years, and provides a brief exploration of the main issues and outcomes.

Chelmsford 2015

The first year the project was based in Chelmsford, where a notional site was chosen to test the development of the prototypes. The site, just over half a hectare and used as a car park, was located due south of existing almshouses built in 1933. This site offered an opportunity to explore the reuse of a car park for housing whilst linking the new almshouses into the existing infrastructure and almshouse community. The students were able to determine the density of the development, what type of housing to explore and imagine their own scenario for the client, all within a guiding principle that each unit was to be approximately 55m^2 in floor area to attract funding from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). Some students chose to look at intergenerational housing, addressing their own housing needs and those of the local student population. Other issues raised through this project concerned views out over a busy road, material use, energy efficiency, existing community, rebuilding the street, access and transport to the city centre, water reuse, gardening, food growing and the inevitable three Bs – bins, bikes and buggies – although in many cases the buggy was replaced by the mobility scooter. As this was the first time running the project with the client (LEAP) their budget restrictions were absorbed into the brief for the students, a tight budget of £70,000 per dwelling delivered. Projected costs were kept in check by final year quantity surveying students who met three times during the twelve week semester with the architecture students to discuss the budget and exchange design ideas. The outcomes of that collaboration were mixed in terms of success, with the design process curtailed for some architecture students as costs appeared to take priority over design for the quantity surveying students (Pooley et al., 2016).

One and two-story buildings were designed to make use of the site and to address neighbouring housing developments. Proposals had community at their heart, reinterpreting the traditional ideas of central shared space. The traditional courtyard arrangement remained a feature in many of the projects where units were situated around landscaped areas and captured the ambition to provide a safer site with no public right of way, another feature of courtyard housing (Wilms Floet, 2016). Safety was one of the key issues that arose out of the ongoing consultation with LEAP and the residents and wardens at the neighbouring almshouses. Students were conscious of the need to address this without compromising access and views.

The students' proposals for the first iteration of the project, run in 2015, were presented to the National Almshouse Association (NAA) at a meeting of design consultants, the students went on to present again at the Housing LIN Eastern Region meeting later that year. On both occasions the projects were well received and the students commended for tackling such complex issues early in their architectural careers.
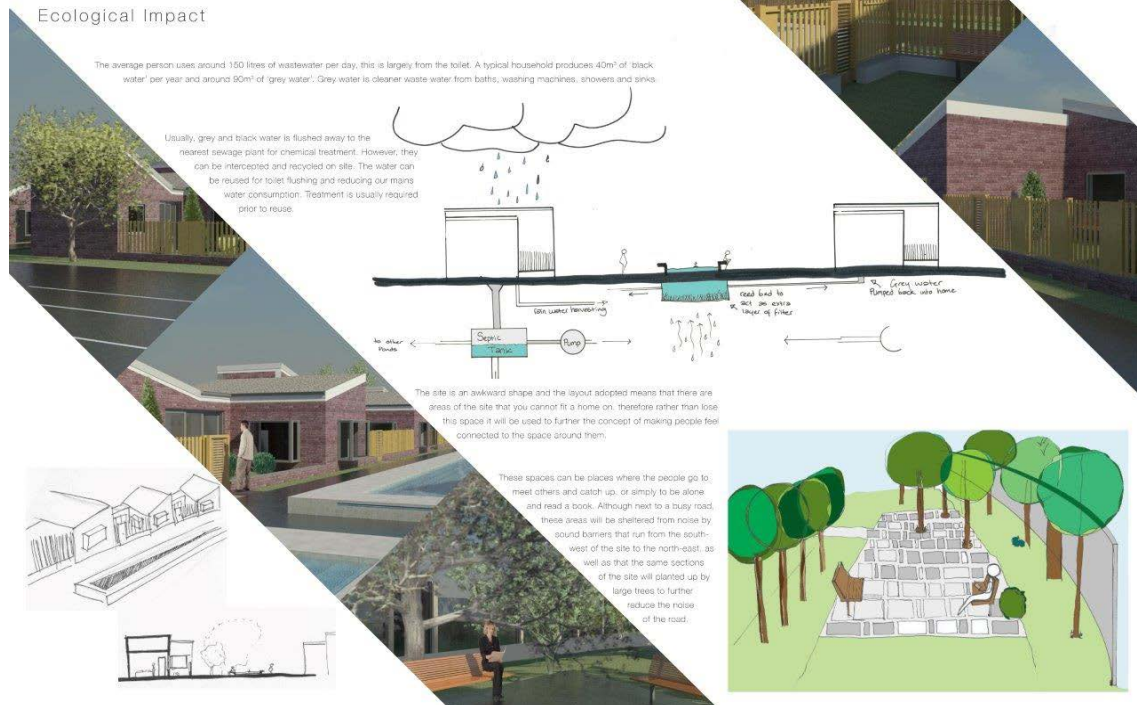
Figure 1. Student project for Chelmsford. Image: Jack Moloney

Colchester 2016

In the second year running the project the brief looked again at expanding an existing almshouse community. This time the issues were more complex. The site was a former bus depot, with a meter drop in level from the existing historic almshouses, with dwellings dating from 1791 and 1803 (and even older dwellings dating to 1678 across the road), to the new site. The bus depot had an existing planning application for student accommodation, and faced a reasonably busy road leading into the centre of Colchester. Once again LEAP acted as client, with the potential that this could possibly become a site for future almshouse development, rather than the fictional site used in 2015.

The restrictive nature of the budget in 2015 placed too much emphasis on keeping costs down, and curtailed creative exploration of housing types. In the 2016 iteration of the brief students were freed from budget constraints but given reasonable guidance from the client. The Colchester project also diverged from the original ambition in that this was a site specific project – not a prototype that could be located anywhere for the right price, inviting students to respond to the site and to knit the new almshouses into the existing fabric of Colchester, as well as the historic almshouses to the south. Issues that had arisen in the previous project – particularly those focused on mixed use and inter-generational living – came much more to the fore. One of the interesting questions that arose more through this project compared to the first year, was the nature of an ageing population. For students who were predominantly in their late teens/early twenties being over 60 or 65 seemed old enough, however if you were 65 in 2016 you were part of a generation that grew up on punk, and were probably still listening to it, you wanted to cycle, garden, go out, and have parties, have friends to stay as

well as children and grandchildren. The project had to be about being active in an almshouse, as well as cater for the mobility scooter, or the potential of a mobility scooter in the future.

The response to this challenge, meshing old and new homes, old and new residents, old and new ideas about housing, onto a tight urban site whilst creating an oasis in the middle of a busy town, another feature of the Dutch hofje as well as the almshouse, demanded that students address issues of environment and sustainability beyond energy and materials, to consider what makes society, not only now but in twenty or fifty years. This is where the almshouse typology is useful, as it creates new visions for living in reasonably dense developments whilst looking towards exemplar models of community living that can be hundreds of years old, as with the almshouses adjacent to the Colchester site used in 2016.

Jaywick Sands 2017

The final project, and this year's iteration of the brief, was based in Jaywick Sands, Essex. Jaywick Sands has its own quite unique history, drawing on the utopian living experiments of other nearby communities of Essex (Worpole, 2015) as well as the arcadian vision of the plotlands movement and idealised rural living (Hardy et al., 1984). Jaywick has been heralded as one of the most deprived areas of the UK, and recent television programmes have focused on the less salubrious aspects of the seaside town. This project offered the most potential to actually get built as LEAP, once again acting as the client for the project, successfully secured a development site through the local authority.

Figure 2. Students and community discuss housing issues over lunch.

As in the previous two years, the students met with the local community, spent time with them at the lunch club in the community centre, and broke down some barriers (on both sides). As well as the social and economic pressures in Jaywick Sands there are the additional constraints of marshy land and developing below sea level with a risk of flooding. The site varies from the previous two projects in that it is a green field site but still has complex constraints. As the Jaywick Sands project matured so did the collaboration between our academic pursuits and the potential for the project to become a live project, for the student work to feed into the community and for all involved to realise the original ambition. Jaywick Sands raised the most controversial questions in terms of creating community, the view that we can design out certain behaviours or design in others harks back to the control and

patronage of historic almshouse benefactors. Raising critical issues of how we design, who with and who for, and what potential environmental, social and economic futures can we address.

Figure 3. Student response to Jaywick Sands and future flooding scenarios. Image: Megan Pledger

Implications for pedagogy and practice

> We spend our lives in what were once the thoughts of architects. Today's thoughts make the world of tomorrow – an awesome responsibility (Day, 2004: 283).

As Day states above, there is an awesome responsibility in creating tomorrow's world, and one second year architecture students faced. Understanding the history and development of housing places that responsibility in its historic context, one that threads from the monastic communities of the middle ages, through the therapeutic communities of the twentieth century, to the present day via Victorian philanthropy and the Thatcherite commodification of home through the right-to-buy (Worpole, 2015).

One of the issues returned to again and again through all three projects is the importance of proximity to neighbours, knowing your neighbours and allowing those happenstance moments, the face-to-face interactions that build and maintain community. The almshouse has a human scale, and even though they are often small compared to other types of housing, residents are forgiving of them, they like to live there (Pannell et al., 1999), they also have potential for releasing development land, exploring new ways of funding and providing 'social' housing in perpetuity. Almshouses are not subject to the right-to-buy and it is hoped that they never will be. As Godfrey wrote over sixty years ago:

> it must be generally recognised that almshouses are performing a really useful function in the community, and all who value our art and history will agree that their preservation is a matter of real moment (Godfrey, 1955: 87)

Themes reoccurred over the three projects, through different sites and different constraints and challenges. One of the issues for us as educators with a keen eye on the future of the built environment, is how these projects feed into the development of the future professional. This is almost impossible to capture, but what is possible to identity is the reflective process students went through during the project. As they explored the needs of almshouse residents so they also explored their own needs, their family relationships, questioning what their grandparents would want, as well as what they might want when they

are older. In this way the project has additionally become a personal reflection on the meaning of family and home, of social and emotional space as well as physical space.

There is a diversity amongst the students, different backgrounds, experiences growing up in different countries, and this has created a richness in the debate in the studio – who are we being architects for, are we designing for or with the community, what is the nature of home? These questions push the original agenda for LEAP and for the students, and offer an opportunity for inter-generational learning. There is a propensity in learning and teaching for students to become product focused rather than process focused (Sterling, 2001), placing an importance of the qualification or grade over the experience. Engaging in community based projects, in this case housing focused, and encouraging reflection on the process, learning retains the possibility to be process focused, generating a social learning as well as an environmental and ecological one as students recognise the importance of community, space to meet, gardens, places to sit, proximity to nature, creating opportunity for happenstance (Jones et al., 2012).

Figure 4. Proposal for an elevated pausing place for Jaywick . Image: Chris Theobald

When the students presented to the NAA in 2015 it was the first time architecture students had presented at that meeting, or to the NAA generally. Presenting at the meeting developed the students confidence far more than presenting in the studio, under more normal review conditions, would have done. The challenge for almshouse charities and the NAA is to how to bring forward the model in a way that meets the current demand for high density and high-rise living (Pannell, 2013). The debate is currently all too often focused on smarter living in smarter cities. There is no argument here for a return (?) to a William Morris style utopian dream, where we live with almost no furniture and have to forgo servants due to our small houses.

Future housing needs to be adaptive and responsive to changing needs, allowing for those downsizing, but still providing space for visitors. There is an argument for a focus on the person within the city, and retaining that focus will enable issues of health and well-being to be more fully addressed in future planning. There have been good examples of the almshouse remodelled for the twenty-first century, as well as an increased number of

community projects getting planning permission for co-housing projects. However these projects, as with shared ownership schemes, still rely on a capital investment, something that the almshouse will never require from a resident.

Conclusion

> In the end there is no escape from architecture, no matter how modest or improvised. Behind any social arrangement there is a physical structure, a location and a landscape as well (Worpole, 2015: 56).

This project requires longer than one semester to explore, the complexity lending itself to a postgraduate project rather than an undergraduate one. Students experiencing working with a client for the first time can be restrict and guided or misguided to producing what the client appears to want or is already familiar with, rather than questioning the client, the brief, and the ambition of the project. This too is a consequence of asking students early in their career to tackle complex issues, understand a different community, a different generation, and even a different culture. A criticism of the project is that students have to tackle too many of these previously un-encountered issues. However by facing these issues they in turn reflected on their own position now, as well as their future role as an architect.

The challenge of this brief for second year architecture students should not be underestimated. However the reward of engaging with a real client to tackle a growing area of concern for all those involved in the built environment should also not be underestimated.

References

Day, C. (2004). *Places of the Soul : architecture and environmental design as a healing art*, Oxford: Architectural Press.

Godfrey, W. H. (1955). *The English Almshouse. With some account of its predecessor, the medieval hospital*, London: Faber & Faber.

Hardy, D. and Ward, C. (1984). *Arcadia for all : the legacy of a makeshift landscape*, London: Mansell.

Jones, P., Pooley, A. and Tinning, B. (2012). *Ecology, Critical Reflection and the Praxis of Change. In: Schwartz, M., Lubell, C., Gall, R., et al. eds. A Future for Earth: Re-imagining Learning for a Transforming World: Proceedings of the 10th International Transformative Learning Conference. San Francisco, 1-4 November, 2012. San Fransisco: Meridian University*

LEAP. (n.d.). *Legacy East Almshouse Partnership*. [online]. Available at: http://www.leapalmshouses.co.uk/home/about-us [Accessed: 16th April 2017]

ONS. (2016). *People, population and community*. [online]. Available at: (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2016) [Accessed: 16th April 2017]

Pannell, J. (2013). *Transforming almshouses for the 21st century. In: LIN, H. (ed). 24.*

Pannell, J. and Thomas, C. (1999). *Almshouses into the next millennium : paternalism, partnership, progress?*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Pooley, A. and Wanigarathna, N. (2016). *Integrating students through a multidisciplinary design project. In: Integrated Design International Conference: ID@50. Bath, 30 June - 1 July, 2016. Bath: University of Bath*

Sterling, S. (2001). *Sustainable education : re-visioning learning and change*, Totnes: Green Books for the Schumacher Society.

Wilms Floet, W. (2016). *Het Hofje*, Nijmegen: Vantilt.