Review of Scottish Architecture Students' Assembly (SASA) Week 2011

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The Scottish Architecture Students' Assembly (SASA) was founded by a group of young architecture graduates and students in 2010. The editors invited co-founder Dele Adeyemo to reflect on the first few years' of SASA's existence.

The following report and recommendations have been generated principally from our first hand experiences in three key areas:

- Our personal experiences of the benefits as well as shortcomings of our architectural education as recent graduates setting up our own enterprise fresh from university in September 2010.

- Our perspective of setting up organising and running the Scottish Architecture Students Assembly (SASA) and lessons learned co-ordinating with students, schools of architecture and the Scottish Government.

- The impressions and opinions received on the structure of the architecture education from students of architecture, tutors and full-time staff in schools of architecture during the SASA events.

Why we need a Scottish Architecture Students Assembly

Scottish students of architecture face unprecedented challenges in finding employment when they graduate. We estimate that around four hundred students of architecture at Part I level and a further two hundred and fifty at Part II are graduating from Scottish universities each year. A recent survey of the RIBA Appointment website revealed only 6 Part I and 16 Part II jobs were advertised, not one of those jobs being in Scotland. The architectural profession in Scotland is suffering like never before. The inescapable reality is that the property boom that sustained the industry for over a decade has now ended.

Government schemes to boost the construction industry have been announced but these will take time to come through and they are based on the fortunes of the economy. We are in the midst of a crisis, we therefore cannot afford to wait until the construction industry picks up again. Imaginative thinking is required now. Never before has it been so important for students of architecture to be aware, organised and speak in a collective voice about their future.

The Scottish Architecture Students Assembly provides that opportunity. SASA is Scotland's only national forum for students of the built environment that is endorsed by Architecture and Place Division of the Scottish Government; the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) and Architecture & Design Scotland whilst retaining an independence from any academic institutions. SASA stands out from other student forums as it strives to move beyond discussion and takes action to affect change. Beyond this current crisis there exists many potential upheavals in the near future such as the threat of tuition fees; further cuts in funding to architecture departments; changes to the course structure to fall in line with the UK or Bologna model and; the possibility of a split from the RIBA were Scotland to become independent from the UK. SASA therefore could be an invaluable forum for students to cut through the inertia of large institutions and tackle the issues at hand.

Origins of SASA

SASA was founded in August 2010 by Dele Adeyemo and Marc Cairns of Pidgin Perfect and a number of other students, notably Becca Thomas. SASA was conceived as an annual festival of architecture and design between students from the five schools of architecture in Scotland.

SASA was a product of a desire we perceived within architectural education to restore an empowered and self-actuated student attitude, the likes of which first sprang into life in the nineteen-seventies through figures such as Cedric Price, with his infamous PolyArk Bus tour, and Geoff Haslam

and Richard Murphy founders of the European Architecture Students Assembly (EASA). Through hosting a series of events consisting of guest lectures, interactive seminars and design workshops, through SASA we hope to show the merit and importance in bringing students from different schools and backgrounds together, proving that collective thought creates a more powerful response.

The inaugural SASA event took place in Glasgow on 20 August 2010, at which students from every school of architecture in Scotland discussed the theme A Collective Urban Identity?. Despite the tough financial climate SASA received sponsorship from many local architectural practices including Collective Architecture, Gordon Murray, Page/Park and Nord Architecture, as well as support from the social network Central Station and other local businesses.

SASA 2011

In late 2011 SASA received financial support from the Scottish Government through their Skills & Education programme to deliver SASA Week 2011, alongside continued support from the practice Collective Architecture.

For five days in December, students collaborated to tackle head the crisis of employment within architecture and discuss the changing professional landscape by exploring the theme of Architecture and Social Enterprise. If there are too few traditional job opportunities within architecture, how can students imaginatively adapt the skills they have developed during their architectural education to work to improve the built environment in Scotland and prevent the 'brain drain' to London and further a field?

SASA Week 2011 took the form of a road tour, traveling to the students in each of the five schools of architecture in Scotland, starting in Aberdeen on the 5th of December, followed by Dundee on the 6th, Edinburgh on the 7th, Glasgow on the 8th and finishing with an exhibition launch and discussion evening on Friday 9th at the New Glasgow Society. One of Scotland's most successful graduate start-up practices Icecream Architecture spoke in Aberdeen, while in Dundee a similarly young practice Dress for the Weather addressed students. In Edinburgh students heard from Kuan Loh, Development Manager from Parc Craigmillar and in Glasgow they were inspired by presentations from Christina Cerulli of Studio Polpo and Sheffield School of Architecture, and Ian Grout, Lecturer in Product Design at the Glasgow School of Art.

SASA 2011 Debate - 'So you think you'll be an Architect?'

The general format for each day in SASA 2011 started with a brief introduction to the background of SASA and its aims. Followed by a presentation on The New Wave: Doing things differently making a difference, a series of articles written by Pidgin Perfect for ScottishArchitecture.com. Outlining the new trends emerging and opportunities out of adversity for graduates, the series gathered contributions from some of the most innovative young and start-up practices in Scotland, as well as key figures in Scottish Architecture including Chris Stewart (Founder of Collective Architecture); Christopher Platt (Head of the Mackintosh School of Architecture) and; Alan Pert (founder of Nord Architecture).

A guest speaker was then invited to give a lecture on their experiences setting up a socially minded practice. The morning's presentations were capped off by an open debate held amongst the students, provocatively entitled So you think you'll be an Architect? This debate was designed to stimulate discussion around the key issues raised, to begin the investigation into what might be the future for architecture graduates and how they felt their architecture education would need to adapt in order for them to get there. During the debate a live feed on twitter (#SASA2011) was conducted to minute what was said and open the debate to a wider audience.

Emerging Ideas from Debate

Whilst the results of these debates can in no way can be measured scientifically, they have certainly begun to reveal recurring impressions and views amongst all students.

When faced with the question, 'so you think you'll be an Architect?' not one student said that they didn't want to become an architect, yet there was a general anxiety amongst all students about future prospects. Almost none of the students we spoke to approaching either their Part I or Part II graduation knew what they would do when they left university, suggesting a worrying trend that students are not being prepared for graduation into a jobless market place. In Aberdeen, when asked why she was not going to attend the afternoon workshop, one third-year student responded she was just worried about her review next week, but conceded she had no idea what she'd be doing during her year out. This was a common response even amongst the students attending.

Most students had a great appreciation for what they were learning, even though the typical architecture curriculum remains incredibly demanding. However, in the debates students from all universities were keen to stress

they would enjoy the opportunity to participate in more live projects, and an opportunity to gain more 'hands-on' experience of construction. As examples of some of the live projects being undertaken in the Scottish schools, several Aberdeen students had undertaken urban activism under the guidance of tutor Neil Gillespie and the issues they were tackling were similar to those touched on by Glasgow School of Art Students in another live project in Milton.

From these conversations and our general observations when in schools of architecture, we believe that the priority of students and tutors is still to perform well academically. Obtaining good grades will always be important to students. The danger is that students are looking to succeed within a curriculum largely designed for a different economic paradigm, rather than being prepared for a reality in which the role of the architect is changing. We believe that many will not be able to practice architecture when they leave university without being able to think innovatively about their skills. However, since SASA 2011 it is clear to us that universities are recognising the need to offer more support to the students. Pidgin Perfect, alongside some of the other young emerging practices mentioned here, are increasing being invited to speak at the Scottish schools of architecture about our experiences of setting up practice. Whilst welcome, these moves don't go far enough.

SASA 2011 Workshop - 'Architecture IS Social Enterprise'

From our perspective as aspiring architects setting up Pidgin Perfect, and studying other forms of enterprise with the goal of creating a sustainable business in the long term, it seems clear to us that the basic business model employed by so many architecture practices is flawed.

From our cursory analysis it would seem that for many practices the basic model has been a type of Fordist system where the cutthroat free market laws of supply and demand dominate. The more contracts a firm wins, the more staff they can take on and the greater the production the greater the profits for the directors or partners at the top. Once a practice reaches a mature level contracts are issued at roughly the same fee scales regardless of the number you are doing and employees are taken on at roughly the same wages so the only way to improve profit margins for the owners is through the volume of production. So the role of many architectural employees becomes streamlined to be as productive as possible and when a crisis of demand comes about, the first people to suffer are the 'workers'.

Yet at its crux architecture is a social endeavour, and most buildings and spaces created have an impact on the collective public regardless of whether they are private property. So if more practices employed this ethos in how they structured their companies using models such as the co-

operative they may be more stable. And if employees were free to engage a wider range of their skills then architecture practices business models would perhaps be able to be more diverse.

As students of architecture we are trained to be design thinkers to solve problems. Our education covers research into networks, infrastructures key to societal development and it gives us a perspective on culture heritage and planning for the future. Yet it seems to us that as a profession we struggle to communicate convincingly the value to clients of investing in these related services.

In our view amongst architects, clients and the public in general, there is an over emphasis on the final design outcome without an understanding of the processes required to achieve it. The debates around the reasons for this are far too great for this essay, however we suspect that the answers lie in three areas. Firstly, we feel that on an individual scale, many graduates who were architecturally trained fail to value the diversity of skills that they have acquired or realise the diversity of contexts they can be applied in, so at a time of crisis where there is a shortage jobs in the sector they struggle to reimagine their professional abilities. Secondly, on a company level, many businesses fail to package the diversity of services well enough into separate definable tasks, seeing them only as part of the greater whole of designing good buildings, so when it comes to a time of crisis in building they find it difficult to find ways of being remunerated for these activities. Finally it seems that many are simply handicapped by the desire to build at all costs, neglecting other related skills to profit from their skills.

1   Jamieson, C., 2011. The Future
for Architects. London: RIBA.

These last two points appear to be borne out by a recent report produced by the RIBA's think tank Building Futures that revealed the shocking statistic that only 50% of UK architects have a business plan.[1] This over emphasis on the final product of the building to the detriment of so many other skills and processes is perhaps institutionally ingrained. Despite recent moves to make the ARB criteria more flexible in response to the current climate, they still remain amongst the tightest in the world. In many European countries, for example, after completing the equivalent of the Part II qualification, all that is needed is a short statutory period working in practice and perhaps a short exam.

Of course there are good reasons why ARB accreditation is so stringent, however the downside is that this can hamper the progress of young practices like ourselves to becoming registered even though we are deeply involved in running projects within the built environment, with complex contracts, whilst liaising with range of design consultants, working at the strategic to the detailed level, encompassing everything but creating permanent buildings.

Beyond institutions, in the majority of the architectural press, we see fetishized images of newly-completed buildings and spaces, which only acts to reinforce to ourselves as a profession and the rest of the public the importance of the final product and diminish the skills and processes required to arrive there.

Surely and particularly at a time when there is a scarcity of building work we should be arguing promoting a broader definition of what architecture is? The afternoon workshops during SASA 2011 titled, Architecture IS Social Enterprise were therefore proposed to encourage students to think of their skills in broader terms than that of the master builder, and to use their skills as architects to think as social entrepreneurs.

They were asked to identify 3 key points, a community or locality; a problem or opportunity and; a social benefit. Whereas the final product of SASA 2010 was derived from agitprop workshops the tangible results from SASA 2011 would be derived from strategies for turning a theoretical student project into a live one.

In order to get the students thinking about how to turn the project they had in mind into a real sustainable enterprise key questions were posed:

- Who will be your clients?
- Who do you need—workforce, contacts and expertise?
- What do you need —support, additional training and investment?
- Who would be your competitors?
- How does your training in architecture give you an advantage?
- How is your proposal sustainable—economically, environmentally and socially?

The general format of the day had to become flexible to adapt to the different students who were present. For many students we used a recent or current studio project as a basis for the workshop. This was particularly interesting to postgraduate students working on their theses, giving them a confidence structure as to how to take their project forwards into the real world.

There were many exciting outcomes and the start of interesting new collaborations. One particular breakthrough came to students running the Mackintosh Architecture Student Society (MASS) when they started talking to a student who had travelled all the way from Aberdeen to the Glasgow workshop. The Mackintosh students who are currently revitalising their student society were able to find out more about how the '57° 10' student lecture series in Aberdeen were structured. Soon this knowledge opened up the possibility to fund the self-actuated live projects

the students were keen to undertake and the concept of MASS Design Studio as a vehicle for Part I students was borne.

The discussions that took place will be invaluable to the students as they begin their next academic term and look forwards to graduating. Many of the students that we spoke to displayed a keen interest and expertise in a particular area from bicycle repair to treatment for cystic fibrosis which, they were interested in continuing after university and the workshop 'Architecture IS social enterprise' gave them the first glimpse that what they were researching could make a difference in the real world and become a real source of income.

Concluding thoughts on SASA 2011

SASA 2011 was conceived as a week-long road show in order to reach the most students possible. Whilst we spoke to many more students than at SASA 2010, synchronising timetables between Universities made it difficult to engage the maximum number of students in each city and attendances in Dundee and Edinburgh were particularly poor.

Getting the institutions not just to support the event but to clear space in the calendar remains a challenge. From the students feedback we heard of an importance on academic assessment of standard criteria but little in the way of preparation in applying these skills beyond university in a challenging market place and little or no recognition for related extra curricular activities. The impression is that schools of architecture have done little to adjust their curricula to the changing times. Current academic systems result in students working competitively more often than not when perhaps they need to be encouraged more and more to work together collaboratively.

As was learned in the New Wave series, people working in collaboration, co-operatives and collectives are producing typologies for students and graduates to generate work, gain valuable experience and making a difference through these difficult times. In Scotland we have only five Schools of Architecture, which poses a unique opportunity for us to collaborate.

Recommendations for Building a Strong SASA Network for the Future

The Benefits of Running SASA throughout the Year Versus the Importance of an Annual Festival

SASA provides an important forum for the introduction of students and individuals from different Universities who wouldn't otherwise have met. By bringing people together in direct face-to-face contact SASA is the catalyst to initiating lasting working relationships and a platform for knowledge exchange at student level across the architecture and design communities in Scotland. Yet the question of what format would best achieve this remains. Both SASA 2010 and SASA 2011 were effectively one-off events. In both instances, as the organisers we had to overcome a general lack of awareness in students and institutions of the benefits of participating.

One of the greatest challenges to creating a forum for students across several universities remains the co-ordination of timetables. The format of SASA 2011 as a week-long road show across the five institutions proved inflexible to these variations with some set of students being free and others in the middle of exams. In addition the late timing of the confirmation of the funding gave institutions only one month to prepare.

By contrast, the format of SASA 2010 (held in one central location in Glasgow during the summer vacation) had the different challenges of being less accessible for students at some of the remoter universities. It also had to compete with out of term commitments, such as students' necessity to work full time or to return home for the vacation.

Running SASA throughout the year could provide the flexibility for even greater numbers of students to get involved. And whilst a one off annual event that was fully supported and co-ordinated between the schedules of all five schools of architecture would be desirable we feel that generating networks and relationships might be more successful as series of smaller events throughout the year that fit well with the university timetables twining groups of students from different institutions. We feel that these smaller events throughout the year would create closer more personal networks between students across Scotland, enabling them to learn from each other throughout the year and equipping them to better respond to topical issues and gather momentum towards a final festival or event.

Why Should the Scottish Government Support SASA?

SASA is an entity existing out with the architectural curriculum and from our perspective as organisers of SASA we have seen how students enjoy being free from such worries as being assessed or being required to meet certain criteria for accreditation.

There are currently very few opportunities for students of architecture to gain experience putting their knowledge skills and learning of Architecture

into practice in the real world free from these worries. And whilst work experience in practice provides this opportunity, from our personal experiences, we have found it to focus putting into practice a narrow set of skills such as focussing mainly on drawing, making models or working on visual presentations. Students rarely tackle broader issues outside of the academic bubble.

SASA has been found to be most successful in providing a vehicle for proactive and enterprising students to take charge of a project and to see it realised together. When students were encouraged to think of how a theoretical project they'd been working on in university could become a real life social enterprise, they became really excited about the opportunities and began to make a connection between the value of their research to real lives. SASA is therefore an important forum for students to step outside of 'student mode' to understand how their skills they've learned in architecture school can be used to change the world around them.

SASA also provides a direct link between the Scottish Government and students of architecture. This creates the opportunity for the Scottish Government to provide better advocacy over student issues, such as with stressing the desire for more live projects, as seen from the section SASA 2011 Summary. In addition it is our goal as founders of SASA that the Scottish Government could use SASA as a medium to talk directly to students and create a dialogue on important future issues such as the content of the curriculum or changes to course structures.

These objectives for SASA create opportunities that the architectural curriculum will traditionally struggle to meet providing the student with a well rounded education as possible. They are therefore in line with the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling the barriers to good quality development, through education, skills and advocacy.

Why SASA should remain a Separate Entity from Schools of Architecture

SASA's independence as a separate entity is important to students gaining experience at employing skills they've learned in university outside the academic mind-set. If, as proposed, SASA is to be the medium for dialogue between the Scottish Government and students of architecture then independence from the academic institutions is crucial. Each school of architecture in Scotland have differing approaches to architecture to varying degrees. Further to this, within each institution there are individuals such as heads of year, professors and course directors who have their own similar and competing visions for the future direction of the architectural education. It is therefore important for SASA to remain as an

independent student voice so that no one institution or individual's vision takes precedence. The more independent a SASA the more confidence the Scottish Government can have in the ideas and issues promoted as being the genuine wishes of the student body.

Why SASA Needs the Support of the Scottish Government

Considerable work and forward planning is required in order to facilitate SASA events as well as the money required to purchase workshop materials and hire venues. SASA 2010 funds were raised primarily through industry sponsorship such as local architects. With SASA 2011 because of the worsening financial crisis support from Scottish architects was significantly reduced. In addition the ambition for SASA 2011 was far greater in embarking on a road tour to each city with a school of architecture across five days. Without funding from the Scottish Government it would not have been possible to dedicate the required time to working on SASA 2011.

Irrespective of the detail of the future format of SASA we believe that there will always be a need for a similar amount of tasks to be done. Spreading these tasks throughout the year would give Universities and students greater time to integrate SASA events into their schedules. The lack of sufficient lead-in time organising the events was a significant factor in the poor turnout in Dundee and Edinburgh. A steady source of funding (as with any organisation) would allow SASA to better plan ahead.

Finally the funding from the Scottish Government demonstrates the support of its 'Architecture and Place' Division for SASA, and cements a relationship binding the two together to the goals of creating as well rounded an architectural education as possible by tackling the barriers to good quality development, through education, skills and advocacy.

Building a Strong SASA Network for the Future

The ultimate goal is for SASA to become an autonomous network continuing to act as a catalyst for initiating lasting working relationships and a platform for knowledge exchange at student level between students of architecture in Scotland and beyond. As with any network design of its infrastructure and investment will be necessary. The founders of SASA have already put in place the basics of a network infrastructure in creating and running SASA websites, blogs, Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Our strong understanding of social media was one of the major factors in the success of attracting students to the very first SASA event, where

students from every school of architecture attended, and it has continued to enable us to effectively communicate the activities of SASA. In the process the debates starting within SASA have broadened out to even wider audiences that have been able to attend our events as can be seen in the impact of the twitter feed explained in the SASA 2011 Summary.

However maintaining a network of blogs, posts to discuss the issues requires a core of dedicated contributors. The creation of Steering Group made up of students from each University would strengthen the SASA network in each institution and empower more people to help generate the discussions and encourage more people to get involved in SASA events.

Furthermore the Steering Group could be consulted on issues concerning the future role of SASA, such as in facilitating 'leaning exchanges'. The Steering Group would inform that initial step to building relationships between students from different schools of architecture as well as looking to build relationships beyond such as in Design and Planning.

Finally it is the intention of the founders of SASA to pass on responsibility as directors to the next set of students. The Steering Group would provide a natural pool of individuals to select from so that SASA might continue to have a life beyond its creators.