

Sir Robert McAlpine – stepping aboard the Coronacoaster with AUDE

This year's AUDE (Association of University Directors of Estates) conference took place from April 12th to the 16th, with one big difference from previous years: the entire conference was online.

To reflect this, the theme was Coronacoaster, where discussions focused around the biggest questions and challenges that universities will face as we come out of lockdown and the much-vaunted 'new normal' emerges. Although not able to meet face-to-face, the virtual nature of the conference meant that many more delegates were able to attend than in previous years.

Having been invited to host a session on Thursday, April 15th, we thought long and hard about our topic. Having seen large learning spaces constantly evolve and adapt to changes in pedagogy and technology and with a potential step change looming, our chosen subject was '**Large learning spaces. What does the future hold?**': a topic that is pertinent to Sir Robert McAlpine's Strategy & Innovation and education teams. Chaired by our Education Sector Head, Russell Day, we had assembled an impressive panel to share their insights:

- Dr Jos Boys, Senior Lecturer in Environments for Learning, UCL
- Emma-Louise Hannigan, Associate/ Education Lead Ireland, HLM Architects
- Lucy Plumridge, Associate Director, HLM Architects
- Rupert Goddard, Partner, Sheppard Robson
- Ian Taylor, Managing Partner, Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios
- Stafford Critchlow, Director, WilkinsonEyre

To add a bit of interest, and to keep the panel (and viewers) on their toes, each speaker had to use Pecha Kucha to deliver their message. This meant they were restricted to only 15 PowerPoint slides and each slide was only visible for comment for 15 seconds. What followed was a fast-moving and animated set of mini lectures.

Jos asked why large learning spaces were needed at all. In recent years (pre-Covid-19) there has been much analysis of their efficacy: however, the question should not be viewed as a binary with or without. Knowledge delivery would always be needed in several forms. The future, Jos believes, will be different types of lecture theatres, where live and virtual users can interact. It's clear we're moving towards HE 'mediafication', where lecturers are no longer the 'sage on the stage' but take on Ted Talk characteristics – even acting like influencers. The pandemic has given us the opportunity to sweep away the inertia that has stymied change. When questioned, Jos gave her perspective on the spatial and technological conditions that will create conditions for effective learning in the future. She was stunned by how the pandemic has changed learning into an online 'connected' environment and is conscious this is a real opportunity to shape the future.

Emma-Louise then pointed out that large learning spaces hadn't really changed in 1,500 years. There is little evidence to show that they're good learning environments: they're passive, only offer a forum for listening and don't encourage students to engage. Also, they're seldom full and so waste resources. Even before Covid-19, students were voting with their feet and accessing material online. It was clear they wanted more online learning but this must be more sophisticated and move beyond the 'virtual filing cabinet'. Emma-Louise then talked about how Australia has been leading in these innovations, experimenting with spaces, furniture, technology and group sizes and then analysing feedback - enabling greater group activity. She closed by saying practice makes perfect and in the UK, as they did in Australia, we must find out what works best through research, trial and error.

She was followed by **Lucy** who said that the move from static lecture-based learning to online resources is inevitable but far from a reality for most universities – also, with over 50% of students reporting that lockdown had impacted their mental health, it's clear that there is still a strong need for spaces that encourage social interaction, collaboration and discussion. 'Traditional' lecture spaces would become part of a mix of formal / informal places to study in a new 'blended' approach. Lucy then ended with an interesting example from Australia. Research had shown that a teaching space that is a double-tier, shallow rake is most effective, encouraging students to work and interact together, a point that was explored further in the Q&A.

Rupert stated that Covid-19 had accelerated online learning, pushing learning out of the lecture theatres and into student rooms. However, the large learning space was far from 'dead' and would continue in a variety of forms. He drew on the example of the Frederick Douglass Centre at Newcastle University (constructed by Sir Robert McAlpine), with its highly flexible lecture theatre and outdoor spaces which encourage interaction and activity. He also highlighted the danger of lecturers without online skills struggling to connect with the 'Tik Tok generation'. Rupert mentioned the need to remain agile and that suites of different spaces would accommodate flexibility for both university and learner. Also, students have always expected a communal, shared experience and will not want to lose this in place on online only. That's why we must ensure online learning complements (not dilutes or replaces) face-to-face learning.

Ian began by stating that 'Character : Size : Location : Context' are all vital elements in learning. In a learning space, how the student's digital device can interplay with its location is vital to success, e.g. the ability to enter virtual rooms with other attendees at a 'live' lecture. He then went on to talk about the value of transition spaces in any large learning space. For example, the lobby can be a very valuable interaction space with many uses, leading us to question how these spaces might be best briefed. He then highlighted the great potential of using outside spaces in other ways and described how outside learning with secondary school pupils had led to better responses and concentration. His memorable conclusion was: 'Think out of the box and think outside'.

Finally, **Stafford** described how the library is always the symbolic heart of the university. He then showed how the Wellcome Collection had taken this further, creating a 'social intellect enquiry space': a sharp contrast to 'just downloading information'. He also explained that a lecture theatre doesn't have to be a 'black box space'. Queen Mary University has lots of glass in its new lecture theatres, creating a greater sense of wellbeing. Stafford shared his experience at Bristol University mathematics department where they have banned devices in the lecture theatre so not to detract from the learning experience. He also described how the University of Exeter's Forum building (constructed by Sir Robert McAlpine) delivered value and flexibility of a large space between the learning spaces and is used as a breakout zone. He also demonstrated how Southbank University were planning flexible lecture spaces with adaptable staging, allowing us to explore 'learning as performance'.

Russell closed the session with an animated Q&A. The huge majority of the 100 delegates who attended agreed it was an extremely enjoyable and informative seminar and a topic that may prove worthy of further research and collaboration when it comes to innovating in new and old education spaces – watch this space.