



# STUDENTS AS CO-CREATORS

## **A Curriculum Design Collaboration**

***Mental Health, Design and Wellbeing: A Co-Design Workshop***

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## **School of Architecture and Cities**

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## Where did the inspiration to do the project come from?

THIS CROSS-DISCIPLINARY collaboration between the Medical School at Imperial College London and the School of Architecture and Cities at the University of Westminster explored the relationship between design, mental health, and wellbeing. Originating in an informal discussion in 2018 reflecting on how lived experience might be a fruitful way to allow students from different disciplines to consider questions of empathy and ethics, the project was three years in the planning. The first iteration was for 50 interior architecture students to work alongside 350 medical students to identify problems and propose solutions for the design of four existing NHS mental healthcare sites. The final iteration involved 650 students, drawn from six under-graduate and post-graduate medicine and architecture-related courses, working together in two one-day co-design workshops, supported by 40+ members of staff and 20 post graduate helpers from both institutions.

## What did you set out to achieve?

Provoking both disciplines out of their comfort zone, the participatory nature of the workshops offered students a positive re-framing of their expectations of what it means to be a 'professional' architect or doctor, as well as reconsidering the language and methods through which they communicate: the word design comes from the Italian word 'disegno' meaning a drawing, but also the drawing out of an idea; an etymology that emphasises the importance of thinking through doing.

Originally conceived as face-to-face workshops, but delivered during the pandemic, teaching plans had to be radically adapted to on-line delivery, to meet the project's ambitious scale, and ensure a genuine shared co-production experience. All these challenges were resolved, by a core team of staff working across the two institutions. This 40-second video (<http://tiny.cc/8u8xtz>) shows how 'Miro' boards enabled 650 students, working remotely across multiple time-zones, to collaborate synchronously in 64 cross-disciplinary design groups. This was facilitated virtually by 40+ tutors working across 4 parallel Zoom meetings on each workshop day. The Miro boards provided a shared 'pin up space' allowing peer learning through seeing each other's projects progress in real time. The boards were designed with a provocative mix of text and image to signpost the brief and activities. Embedded links to pre-recorded videos of keynote speakers, as well as video tours of the sites, were live streamed to the parallel meetings. Additional expert input was provided by creating a library of interviews with mental health and design experts. Patients and carers were kept centre stage through 2-hours of video interviews and testimonials. Student 'co-creators worked with staff in advance to create the video material, and site information package.

## How did students and staff work together on this project?

The workshops were designed as a series of tangible tasks that stimulated discussion and restated the importance of 'hands-on skills' in both medicine and architecture. These included asking groups to create word-clouds of what co-production meant to them, image-mapping emotional responses on to different sites, and representing in modelling clay what an ideal mental healthcare space should smell, feel, sound, and taste like. The discussions these activities generated were summarised into a 'User Brief' at the end of the first workshop, and then underpinned a 'Design Poster' made in the second workshop, illustrating students' creative response to that brief. Both workshops involved keynote speakers, interviews with clinicians,

patients, carers and other service users, as well as live Q&A panels offering feedback from architects, clinicians, and patient advocates.

We put the following news item on the University of Westminster website:

<https://www.westminster.ac.uk/news/school-of-architecture-cities-collaborate-with-imperial-college-london-on-mental-health-design-and>

And held an Online Exhibition as a dynamic artefact:

<http://www.openstudiowestminster.org/co-production-2020-2021/>

Our five student partners actively contributed to (and in some cases led) the preparation and delivery of content before the two workshops. Tasks included visiting, photographing, surveying and drawing up, the four chosen hospital sites as well as conducting and editing video interviews with keynote speakers.

In addition, students participated in the post evaluation process attending feedback sessions and giving written feedback. They also were involved in two public panel discussions that followed the project, the first organised by Dementia Action Alliance called 'Reframing Dementia Through Co-Production and Design' (21.06.21) and the second 'Practices of Care' was an event we organized as part of the London Festival of Architecture (11/06.21). We invited student participants to speak at both events, as well as to join the audience.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/reframing-dementia-through-co-production-and-design-panel-discussion-tickets-154840065805>

<https://www.westminster.ac.uk/events/practices-of-care-a-cross-disciplinary-discussion-on-designing-for-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

**What kind of impact do you anticipate that your work may have on learning and teaching going forward (specific to your course/module or in a broader context)?**

Considering the scale of the collaboration, which included 650 students from across six courses, and bridging both under- and post-graduate, namely: BSc Medicine, BA Architecture, BA Interior Architecture, BSc Architectural Technology, Master of Architecture, RIBA Part III as well as 40+ members of staff, the impact across the School of Architecture and Cities is significant – breaking down course specific silos, the shared experience of participating creating new networks and friendships for educators and students alike. Another immediate impact is the workshop will run again in 2021/22.

The Co-Production Workshops were situated in the 'Professional Practice' Modules for each of the five architecture courses involved. While acquisition of discipline-specific skills and competencies was an expected outcome, the structure of the workshops fostered consideration of broader qualities such as ethics, empathy and duty-of-care. The terms co-design, co-creation, and co-production all describe an open design process that empowers a wide range of stakeholders to make a creative contribution to the formulation and solution of a problem. Co-design offers an immersive learning experience and challenges the conventional pedagogy of designer-client / expert-user, introducing experts by experience.

## Any lessons learned from working in partnership?

Ambitious in scale and provocative, the Mental Health, Design and Wellbeing co-production workshop, taught us that a key part of being an architect or a clinician is the ability to listen with care and work collaboratively. The partnership transformed existing pedagogies in both disciplines. Following reflections from students and staff, who all whole-heartily embraced the challenges of the process of conceiving, setting up and delivering such a large-scale educational workshop across institutions and disciplines, the overall partnership was identified by all actors involved as an extremely rewarding experience.

Considering the scarcity of opportunities for collaboration between distinct courses and across institutions, as educators we reflected on the important benefits of working across disciplines while relating to societal issues that prevail outside the university sphere. Working directly with stakeholders and patient advocates as part of a synchronous teaching activity, challenged the way we perceive co-production in the creative design process.

Selected student feedback highlights the key lessons learnt when reflecting on the notions of co-production, empathy, and collaboration in the fields of education and practice, while identifying changes in perception before and after the completion of the project.

The quotes below have been extracted from Student Feedback received in reflection to the workshop within a brief period after its completion and include comments from student partners from both University of Westminster and Imperial College alike:

### The Importance of Co-Production

*'This design project has taught me the importance of co-production, especially in the field of mental health and well-being. It is only when the stakeholders come together, that we can think of innovative, creative and effective user-centered solutions.'* (Medical student)

*'It's surprising how often co-production doesn't happen, and how much difference it can make, in terms of innovation, creativity, and better patient outcomes, when it's done effectively.'* (Medical student)

### Exercising Empathy

*'Collaborating together with complete strangers was a true exercise in empathy and one that made me fall in love with healing people all over again. I re-discovered how healthcare has the power to touch people's hearts and how creativity is the key to achieving that.'* (Medical student)

*'Further to the workshop, I believe I have become more aware of the need to place my design thinking in the patient's eyes to create an innovative space that helps put mental health patients at ease. I have also found that working alongside medical professionals has helped me understand the space in more depth.'* (Architecture student)

*'This project has allowed me to really think in-depth about how to better create a better conducive environment for those with special needs and how to put myself in their shoes and empathise with them.'* (Architecture student)

*'The Mental Health and Wellbeing project was a brilliant chance to appreciate that the role of a doctor is sometimes understanding how a patient feels, rather than objectively treating the immediate problems they can see.'* (Medical student)

## Re-framing Collaboration

*'Mental Health and Architecture are closer than many people may think. The collaboration between these two sectors is essential in order to provide an innovative approach to healing.'*

*'The design project demonstrated that a shared goal of helping others facilitates collaboration like nothing else.'* (Architecture student)

*'Collaborating with the architecture students was a wonderful opportunity to explore the non-medical side of the profession. Sharing ideas to create a sustainable, efficient and welcoming environment for patients, relatives and healthcare workers alike is essential to provide optimal care and a smooth recovery.'* (Medical student)

*'It was really eye opening how collaborating with other people from a different educational background would result in something I would have never come up with on my own, or with only people studying medicine.'* (Medical student)

*'The Mental Health and Wellbeing design project was a fantastic collaboration. We learnt that architecture and design are also an important part of a patient's recovery, offering safe and comfortable spaces.'* (Architecture student)