



Opening doors: Rethinking work experience at BPTW

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This year we overhauled BPTW's work experience offer for young people. Moving away from ad-hoc individual placements throughout the year, we developed a programme designed to provide a structured, in-depth introduction to the architectural design process and the wider built environment, targeted at the profession's under-represented communities.

The need for change

Recent evidence shows that the architectural profession is becoming more diverse with gradual progress being made. However, there is still a significant disparity relative to our wider society, particularly in relation to representation from different ethnic and socio-economic groups.

The time and costs involved in becoming an Architect is a particular barrier, further exasperated by the government's decision lower the entry level age for Level 7 apprenticeships which now makes it an unviable route for students looking to study for their Masters and professional qualifications going forward.

As community-focused designers, the backdrop to this work experience change is our long-term aspiration to see the profession diversify and, in turn, to strengthen the range of lived experience within our own studio ultimately leading to more inclusive, innovative and socially responsive buildings and places.

Architecture has a direct impact on the people and places it serves, and the profession must become more representative of the diverse communities with whom we collaborate. This goes beyond project-focused community engagement events and puts a spotlight on our practice ambition to truly diversify our team at all levels. As Peter Sofoluke put it in his opinion piece 'Tomorrow's Architect Today' (2024): "I believe more direct intervention from the profession is required at a stage prior to students embarking on formal or traditional architectural education".

We therefore wanted to see if we could develop a programme that would create the opportunity for us to support students through the Part 1 Level 6 apprenticeship stage of their training.



Site visit gave students the opportunity to explore their project location



Students developed concept sketches, applying spatial planning skills learnt through the programme.

The challenges

For many young people architecture remains difficult to access. It is seldom taught in schools, career routes can appear unclear, and opportunities often depend on informal networks or 'cultural capital' which is the ability to navigate cultural systems and processes to one's advantage (this is expanded later in the article). Spiralling tuition fees and the longevity of an architectural education also play into this, alienating people from the profession.

It is accepted that developing alternative, more affordable routes is fundamental to ensure it is open to all. The government's decision to change eligibility for Level 7 apprenticeship funding has been felt heavily by the architectural profession, seeing many practices unable to support students through this route going forward. In parallel, the ARB's shake up of the architectural education system will see Bachelor level degrees cease to be accredited by the body. This opens the door to greater exploration of Level 6 apprenticeship opportunities in practice. The universally faced question by practices is how feasible is it to make a 3–4-year commitment to a school leaver with no prior or formal architectural training?

Level 6 apprenticeships have long been a discussion and as a practice we are keen to explore how we can move forward on our original goal by engaging with young aspiring architectural or built environment professionals before they embark on formal Higher Education.

The programme

Our studio is based in the Royal Borough of Greenwich within close proximity to the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Lewisham and Southwark, all with diverse communities, the very groups we see under-represented in the architectural profession. The 'Lewisham Education Business Partnership' team annually coordinates work experience across Lewisham and Greenwich. Along with the RIBA's work experience team, they were essential in reaching a wide range of applicants for our programme. We also reached out to local schools around our major estate regeneration schemes. This provided a unique opportunity for young people to understand the design thinking behind the changes in their vicinity and gain experience in the process we undertake in creating positive environments for communities and neighbourhoods.

We decided that we would offer between 10 and 12 spaces on the programme and having received over 50 applications where each candidate answered questions about their interest in architecture/built environment and their interest in the practice. After a blind review of applications and a light interview process 11 students were invited to join the programme.

The programme was designed to introduce students to the main design stages of a project as well as day to day practice life. The skills developed encompassed: site visits, site analysis, sketching, iterative designs, physical and software modelling, regulatory standards, sustainability, drafting, team-working and time management, all feeding into a final portfolio.



Students making their way from BPTW's office through Greenwich Park to the project site, exploring the local context en route.



Students worked in teams and presented their analysis of the site's opportunities, challenges and local context.

Beyond the design exercises themselves, the programme was intended to give students knowledge that is often acquired informally: how architects work, what a portfolio might include, how ideas are presented, and what different routes into the profession can look like with talks from a number of speakers including a quantity surveyor and educators involved in apprenticeships and architectural technology.

By the end of the programme all the students curated their own portfolios and were all able to confidently present a considered design proposal with an understanding of the key components involved in developing a design.



// We designed this programme to give students a real insight into both the creative and professional sides of architecture. Seeing their knowledge and confidence grow throughout the programme was incredibly rewarding for us. We hope this experience not only inspires them to pursue a career in the built environment but exposes them to the wider scope of learning and training opportunities available. //

Briza Carrascoza & Jacqueline Hill, BPTW



The work experience cohort
alongside the BPTW Work
Experience Team

'Cultural Capital' reimagined

'Cultural Capital' is a concept related to non-financial assets that influence the probability of success in education, work, and society. This manifests through knowledge, skills, language, behaviours, qualifications, and familiarity with cultural norms. Architecture is ultimately an experience, highly influenced by cultural capital, and therefore results in very early divisions with those who have prior access to:

- > An understand of what architecture really is
- > An understanding of how to build a portfolio
- > Architectural work experience
- > An understanding of university and apprenticeship routes
- > Professional contacts and role models



// I thoroughly enjoyed the week and gained a much greater understanding of architecture and the work carried out within the practice. The whole team was incredibly welcoming, supportive and generous with their time, which made the experience both enjoyable and valuable. I am very grateful for the opportunity and for everything I was able to learn throughout the week. //

Shanzeh Raza, BPTW Work Experience Participant 2026

Through this early engagement approach, we are looking to do our part in addressing the 'cultural capital' imbalance we see in the wider profession, giving aspiring architects access to experiences and knowledge that others may acquire informally through family, education, or professional connections.

For our participants, the programme offers a realistic insight into what architecture in practice is like: the creativity, discipline, collaboration and technical attributes that comes with shaping places. For BPTW, it creates an opportunity to build lasting connections with young people, schools and local communities.

At the end of the programme, it was encouraging to see enthusiasm for maintaining contact with the practice and for this first cohort to exchange contact details creating a peer network. We see this is one of the greatest connections they could take away from their experience with BPTW.

As they all individually look to embark on similar paths, sharing their journeys, choices and learning with each other will give them a new form of collective cultural capital.



On the final day, students presented their projects, showcasing the skills and knowledge they had developed during their time on the programme

BPTW Team

Frances Abrahamsen / Briza Carrascoza / Jacqueline Hill / Peter Sofoluke
Tracy French / Aoife Tierney / Zeynab Ahmed / Alan Wright

References

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