The urban design studio: Staff intentions, student experiences, and lessons learned from Manchester Urban Design Lab, University of Manchester, UK

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Abstract

The design studio is the cornerstone of technical applied urban design education – both as a physical space for students to learn within, and pedagogical philosophy for developing and delivering curriculum in higher education settings. A studio-based approach to urban design teaching must reflect the multi-faceted nature of the discipline - a challenge when the current field lacks a consolidated mandate – simulating real-world challenges and contexts and preparing students for the demands of practice. This article explores the pivotal role of the design studio at the University of Manchester (UoM) in shaping future urban designers - emphasizing its contribution to pedagogy, skill development, and nurturing a collaborative and supportive design culture that can extend beyond higher education into professional practice. The studio acts as an interactive and practical laboratory where theoretical knowledge is translated into practical application, where students can experiment, refine ideas, collaborate with peers and tutors, and learn to effectively communicate design visually and orally. The studio-based approach aims to develop technical competencies, cultivate critical thinking, and promote processes that deliver more contextually responsive, people-centered, high quality urban design solutions. The article considers how students (both UK based and international) within the Manchester Urban Design LAB at UoM perceive, and respond to, the studio-based approach during their 1-year dedicated MSc Urban Design program – highlighting their perspective that it instils a positive culture – shaped through the promotion of open dialogue, peer-critique, collective learning, and formative and summative design crits. It is however imperative that these spaces avoid several negative issues that have plagued studio approaches in fields such as architecture in recent years. This brings into focus the role of the academic/tutor in delivering studio that seeks to encourage creativity - where failure is framed as a learning opportunity with a culture of constructive feedback and mentorship at the heart of developing resilience and adaptability in students – as well as developing an appropriate curriculum that maximizes the studio environment. At MUD-Lab/UoM the design studio approach directly shaped, and currently supports, our bespoke framework for practicing urban design (Black et al., 2024) and sits at the very heart of our approach to education.

Keywords: urban, design, education, studio, applied design, urban designer

1. Introduction: Urban Design and Education

Urban design is not easily defined as a field or discipline; it lacks a consolidated mandate. It is both conceptual and spatial – which presents a challenge for urban design educators and university programs (Black et al., 2025). The lack of definitive narrative is evident when one considers the diverse ways in which urban design courses have evolved and the resultant variation in how universities deal with this emerging field (Black & Mell, 2024). Cidre (2016) considered the variance visible in contemporary urban design pedagogies – demonstrating the array of thinking on what urban design should be influencing and how it can be taught – with climate change, housing, public space, food production, health, ageing, sustainability, and design quality all considered as components within the remit of an urban design agenda (Romice et al., 2022). This fragmentation

of education in urban design (*see* Cuthbert, 2007) can mean that what a student will learn will very much depend on the university chosen and the emphasis of the program itself (UDG, 2022).

It also means that the role of the design studio in urban design education can greatly vary from institution to institution, depending on the academic and professional approach of the staff who establish and teach a course (Boling et al., 2016). With no process for accrediting teaching of urban design in the UK (Rudlin & Montague, 2019) the core skills, knowledge, and competencies required are unclear – leading to diverse learning outcomes across courses and subsequent impacts on the value of the design studio as an appropriate and effective environment for learning. Many universities in UK, for example, focus heavily on theory (such as the University of Cardiff, Glasgow University, and University of Newcastle (Black & Mell, 2024)) where the use of dedicated studio-led approaches and spaces is less required or utilized. Other universities deliver urban design as a specialist pathway set within an architecture structure (Palazzo, 2014) – leaning heavily on the traditional architecture studio-model (such as Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Reading). A smaller number of universities provide programs which are more technically focused, integrating bespoke urban design studio-learning approaches that are stand-alone, beyond the traditions of more established disciplines such as planning or architecture (UCL, University of Strathclyde, and University of Manchester) (*see* Romice et al., 2022). It is this final approach to teaching and learning, which emphasizes the importance of the bespoke urban design studio, which is reviewed in this study – given its novelty in sitting outside of the more established lecture theatre or architecture studio environments and their historical embedded expectations and challenges.

2. The Studio in Design Education

The studio-based model for education in design fields can be traced back to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the mid 1600's, where master-apprentice relationships dominated training and learning models (Cuff, 1992). The Bauhaus movement and school later redefined the notion of a studio-based environment for learning as a more collaborative, experimental space (Gropius, 1965). Popularized in the more traditional and historic field of architecture as a core component for design development and creative expression – the studio took on popularity in urban design within the UK in the 1960's, as cities rapidly expanded post-war and educators and researchers sought out ways to better explore and test new approaches to placemaking and delivering higher quality civic projects (Madanipour, 2006). The notion of a studio as a forum for education in design aligns with constructivist pedagogy – focused on the notion of teachers as facilitators of learning, with an emphasis on students' active construction of knowledge and skills through student-centred learning. This constructivist studio approach provides students with the opportunity to engage with authentic practical projects, and are guided through a process of problem solving, having to respond to spatial context and adapt to design challenges which they might experience in professional practice (Fleischmann & Daniel, 2010).

The studio can be defined traditionally as a physical space, normally dedicated to a particular program or design module, that students can access to work on their projects and assignments both within scheduled teaching timetables and beyond the structured lessons for independent or team-focused work. Contemporary urban design studios may offer a broader experience to include digital spaces (Oh & Zurlo, 2021) where new technologies and software can be integrated and explored (such as VR, AI, and smart tech).

The design studio has historically been subject to robust critique – and recent research, focusing on predominantly architecture-based studios in higher education, uncovered a myriad of concerns directly related to their usage. These include evidence of gender and racial biases in feedback and treatment of students by tutors/staff (Deamer, 2022); systemic issues of student pressures resulting in anxiety, stress, and exhaustion; and imbalanced power dynamics identified between staff and students, including toxic cultures with bullying and misconduct exposed (The Guardian, 2021). Many schools now enforce policies specifically designed to overcome some of these issues (RIBA, 2021) – with The Bartlett at University College London going as far as to employ external

consultants to drive change as a direct result of historic shortcomings within their studio culture and approach (Brown, 2022).

3. Urban Design Education at University of Manchester

The authors are based within the Manchester Urban Design LAB (MUD-Lab) at the University of Manchester – where they teach a 1-year specialist MSc Urban Design program that is centered around a studio-led approach to teaching and learning. The MUD-Lab approaches urban design as a technical product and applied discipline that focuses on people, experience, and context (Black et al., 2025). Much of the work undertaken by the MUD-Lab is influenced by the thinking on urban design from the turn of the 21st Century with guidance such as By Design (DETR & CABE, 2000) and The Urban Design Compendium (Llewelyn-Davies, 2000). To achieve this the MUD-Lab advocates a studio-based approach, teaching practical design skills across multiple scales. The MUD-Lab's territory is dealing with the physical forces of the city, representing the local and enhancing life and urbanism through comprehensive analysis and logical process. From this premise the Applied Urban Design Framework (Black et al., 2025) was developed, building on previous urban design process development (Black & Sonbli, 2019) – and it is this framework for urban design practice that shapes the use of the studio as a pedagogical tool.

The MUD-Lab structures teaching within a bespoke design studio (Figure 1), a facility located on the university campus which provides a physical learning environment for practical problem-based teaching and learning. The studio is equipped with physical and digital resources to support learning and teacher-to-student and student-to-student collaborations. The facility sits alongside a 3D model workshop space (Figure 2) that allows students to develop physical models to test context, design concepts, and detail.
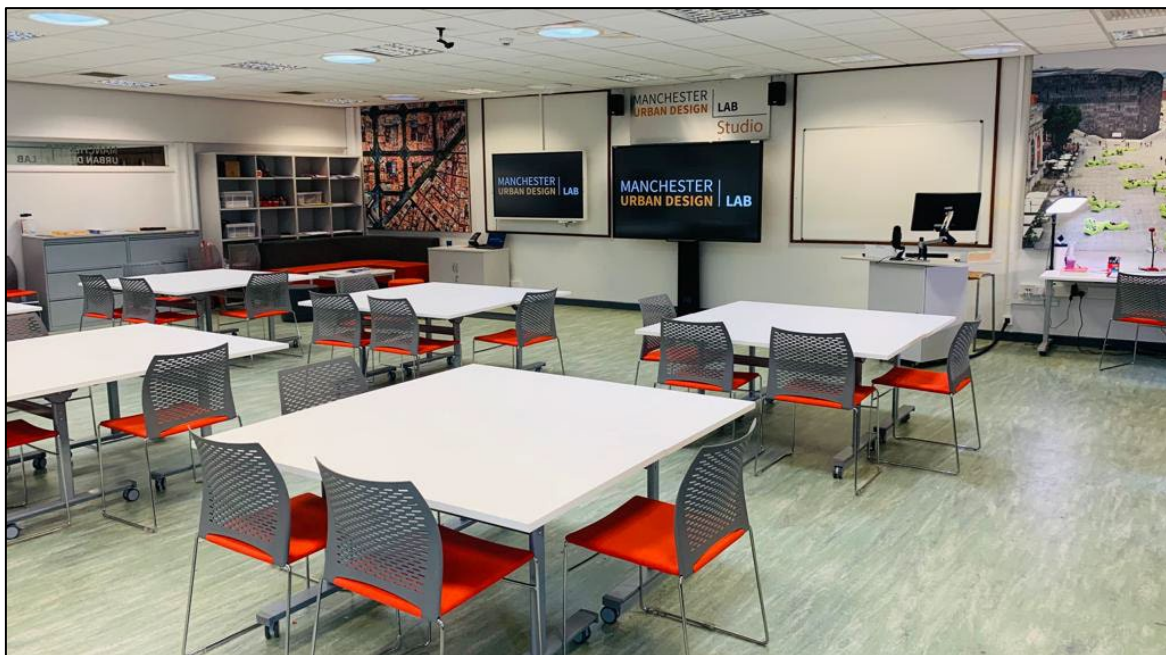

Figure 1 The MUD-Lab studio is organised to allow information-oriented lectures and workshop introductions as well as guest speaker presentations, practical exercises and small-size group collaborations. It also provides a flexible environment which can be arranged to allow the delivery of one-to-one direct feedback through design crits

Figure 2 The 3D model workshop allows students to explore design ideas and contextual responsiveness in an applied and practical manner – testing and evaluating proposed solutions and concepts

Within the MUD-Lab structure the practical, studio-based teaching and learning does not fully replace the theoretically focused, instructor-led lecture theatre environment associated with higher education. The theoretical underpinning provided through lectures forms a critical part of the process, providing the foundation upon which students can build new knowledge through their studio-based experiences—ensuring that the education experience delivers not only knowledge gathering and exchange, but knowledge application (Black & Mell, 2024). Students are encouraged to maximise their use of the studio throughout the year and view the studio environment as more than a physical room, but as an active system of engagement in their learning and development.

4. Evaluating the MUD-Lab Studio

This research set out to explore the studio-based teaching and learning approach within MUD-Lab at the University of Manchester. The studio has been fundamental to urban design education at the University for the last 10 years, since the inception of the MSc Urban Design and International Planning (UDIP) programme in 2015. This paper draws upon the authors' direct teaching experience during this time, along with an evaluation process, formalised in the 2020-21 academic year, and undertaken in the subsequent academic years 2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25. The evaluation process aimed to gather feedback from MUD-Lab teaching staff and postgraduate students enrolled on the MSc UDIP programme and has informed annual incremental programme adaptations implemented during this period. The research scope focused on the role and impact of the studio as a vehicle for teaching and learning, capturing attitudes, perceptions and experiences –and reflecting on how and why we operate a studio; the perceived benefits; critiques; areas for improvement; and how we can ensure that urban design pedagogy within the studio environment consistently delivers the intended teaching and learning outcomes, evolving to meet emerging needs.

A series of techniques were employed to capture information pertaining to the scope of this research during the 5-year evaluation period. Unstructured interviews were undertaken with 11 members of staff involved in studio teaching (including main academic staff, teaching tutors, and regular external contributors) to explore their intended rational for the urban design studio, and how it is set-up and delivered in conjunction with intended learning outcomes and the wider curriculum agenda. Student perspectives were captured through anonymous unit-evaluation surveys completed at the end of each semester by students for all studio-facing modules (*student n. 168*) (including semester 1 'Urban Design Studio' and 'International Urban Design', semester 2 'Urban Design Project', 'Masterplan Studio' and 'Urban Design Futures Studio' and semester 3 'UDIP Design Dissertations'); studio-specific surveys conducted at the end of each academic year for all graduating urban design students (also anonymous) (*n.86*); and organised open focus groups held twice a year (at the conclusion of semester 1 and semester 2) with students to capture their views, perspectives, and experiences of studio (*n.73*).

Interview and focus group transcripts and survey responses were collated and coded (using NVivo software) to unpack the staff intentions for the studio (its importance for educating urban design) and the student experiences (the perceived benefits and pitfalls of engaging in a studio-led learning environment). Through the thematic analysis of the MUD-Lab staff interviews, 5 key reasons for undertaking a studio approach in urban design emerged. 5 broad themes were also identified based on the analysis of student responses that encapsulate their experiences (positive and negative are evident within each). Throughout the study period the MUD-Lab has sought ways to directly respond to the evaluation responses, implementing new practices and initiatives with the express intent of enhancing the experience and improving the outcomes of the studio as a learning environment. The importance of learning lessons and adapting and evolving are critical to ensure the studio remains a relevant and effective element of urban design pedagogy. As authors we hope these findings are helpful to others seeking to foster a new studio-approach – or evolve an existing one – within their own institutions.

5. The Staff Intentions: Importance of a Studio-Led Approach

To understand the role of the studio in urban design education it is imperative that a clear approach and principles are identified, with a defined practical aim. There is not a single universal set-up for how to operate a design studio – it is therefore vital to unpack the rationale behind any given set-up to ensure that it is rooted in a clear aspiration and context. Unpacking this rationale was central to the staff interviews and subsequent thematic analysis, the outcomes of which identified 5 key reasons for undertaking a studio-led teaching and learning practice. These can be summarized as pedagogy; critique; professional preparation; tangible outputs; and culture.

5.1. Pedagogy

The design studio is viewed as the epicentre of learning in MUD-Lab – fostering the core skills and competencies that lectures alone cannot provide. It emphasizes an active and project-based learning model (Webster, 2008) where students engage with real-world sites and 'learn by doing'. It is a form of 'problem-based learning' (PBL) with students tasked to find solutions that are iterative and context based (Salama, 2016). Teaching staff highlighted that the studio approach aims to *"give students the dedicated space to reflect on their projects, somewhere they are comfortable in learning not only from their successes, but also their failures…in many ways our job as educators is to facilitate student learning, not to control and manage it exclusively"* (MUD-Lab Tutor #3). The studio exists to act as a vehicle for supporting intending learning outcomes – with the MUD-Lab taking a very technical applied approach to urban design teaching, the studio is argued by staff to be the ideal learning environment to ensure a focus can be on real-world style project submissions – with students encouraged to collaborate to enhance creativity and critical thinking (Oh et al., 2013) and graphical communication and associated skills have space to be taught, tested, and developed.

5.2. Critique

The studio is also highlighted by staff as playing a vital role in the feedback loops between tutors and students – with the crit process at the centre of this. Crits are pivotal but can be traumatic and stressful if poorly managed (Anthony, 2002). At MUD-Lab the studio crit is central to how the semester is planned and delivered – *"crits are strategically placed as key milestones in student project's to ensure everyone gets feedback on the major components of their submission, it is also a useful way to encourage students to be working regularly on their schemes to avoid falling behind, and allows us as staff to pick up where they might need some extra help – oftentimes that is individual problems, but sometimes we are able to quickly spot a corporate issue in the learning and re-visit certain topics or areas with the whole group"*(Tutor #8). At MUD-Lab crits are graded and compulsory (summative) to ensure they are taken seriously and students treat them as key stages in their learning process. The importance of the weekly studio also ensures students get to know staff more informally given their regular exposure – meaning crits become less frightening and can feel like an extension of the informal feedback (formative) being received on almost a daily basis. It is also important that feedback within the crits, and more informally in-studio, be consistent - with balanced and constructive feedback. Staff are encouraged to view themselves as facilitators of the student's project development, not just critics of it (Goldschmidt et al., 2010).

5.3. Professional Preparation

One of the core justifications for a studio approach in MUD-Lab was the requirement to prepare students for future employment – to ensure they graduate with experiences that mimic what they are likely to encounter in professional practice delivered through authentic studio scenarios. "It is our job to bridge education and practice – to prepare the students for what is to come next. The studio needs to, as best as we can manage, replicate how designers are working in the real-world, obviously it will never be perfect in this regard – ultimately, it's a controlled environment we provide, but there are lots of things we can do and include to make it as realistic as possible." (Tutor #1).

Some of the elements of the studio approach that seek to replicate real-world experiences and prepare students for post-education were cited as "external engagement with practitioners as often as is possible" (Tutor #3); "encouraging and providing a platform for multi-disciplinary collaborations" (Tutor #10) (see Natarajan & Short, 2023); "ensuring integration of policy and design" (Tutor #8); "partnering with local authorities, developers, and practices to ensure students can see how our studio reflects what is going on beyond these walls" (Tutor #8); and "involving, where possible, students in wider MUD-Lab projects and research that has tangible impacts beyond academia" (Tutor #6). Students should complete their 1-year MSc UDIP at MUD-Lab and have as seamless a transition into their chosen vocation as possible – "without the design studio we simply cannot give students that insight into what their work life in urban design will look and feel like" (Tutor #1).

5.4. Tangible Outputs

Without clear and tangible outputs that will benefit the students long-term the studio risks being viewed as a vanity project, or a tradition, rather than a bespoke methodology for delivering core learning outcomes. The MUD-Lab studio is held up as an ideal vehicle for ensuring students can produce their best work and deliver the best design projects. *"The studio allows the students to produce a wide range of different outputs…not only their completed projects, but they also get to showcase their skills in graphical communication, analysis, design detail, software, even physical 3D modelling"* (Tutor #2). These outputs are not only for grading purposes to collect the necessary unit credits to graduate, but also to develop portfolios that will supplement future job applications. *"One of the key deliverables of the studio here is that students end up with a really strong design portfolio – this is key to differentiating yourself in a crowded job market. Not many will bring their essays or coursework reports to a job interview…. but they will absolutely bring their portfolio and their models. I hope students see the value in our approach here, that their university assignments have*

a dual role, well as long as we make sure the projects are relevant and they have the tools to produce fantastic outcomes." (Tutor #11). To support such physical outputs MUD-Labs supplements the design studio with a dedicated 3D model workshop (see Figure 2) – and scheduled portfolio training that provides students the opportunity to receive feedback on their personal portfolio work prior to applying for jobs.

5.5. Culture

MUD-Lab staff demonstrated a strong belief that for the urban design studio to work in the ways they intend and for it to be successful – it requires a holistic approach and perspective that seeks to promote a broader culture that students can associate themselves with. "Having a physical space is necessary of course, but it's not enough on its own, students need to want to be in that space and feel a sense of ownership and belonging – otherwise it becomes a chore rather than an experience"(Tutor #7) To develop this culture several key elements were highlighted – aiming to foster a 'team-environment', ensuring the studio space is 'welcoming and attractive', inspiring students with a clear undertaking of what the outcomes will be if they invest and engage regularly, and finding innovative ways to allow natural connections and relationships occur.

"At MUD-Lab we have a very clear appreciation that it is about more than the physical spaces themselves – what makes the studio work is the people. Look after the people, staff, students, externals, and things seem to take care of themselves. You cannot force a culture….but you can provide the right conditions for it to manifest, we do so much to try and foster this, not always successfully – but our yearbooks, showcases, external events, drinks evenings, and even our branding [MUD-Lab]… it is always noticeable that as the year goes on more and more students want to have our branded stuff, they become more and more part of the MUD-Lab". (Tutor #8).

6. The Student Experience: Perceived Benefits (and Pitfalls) of a Studio-Led Approach

As previously discussed, the studio-led approach to urban design education places the student at the forefront of the learning environment – offering a platform for more direct engagement and more individual control over how to apply what is being taught. The system is designed to test students, whilst also arming them with responsibility for their own educational progress – the student experience therefore becomes fundamental to the successful operation of the urban design studio. It is imperative students understand and recognise the rationale for a studio-led approach, their attitudes and perceptions will ultimately shape their level of involvement and subsequently how much they get out of the intended learning. Whilst it remains true that individual perceptions may not always truthfully reflect reality (Ding & Gebel, 2012), they can have tangible impact on behaviour and resultantly whether something (the studio in this case) functions as intended (Black & Street, 2014). This research unpacks 5 student-perceived benefits of the studio - each have counter arguments – pitfalls and potential concerns raised that should be viewed of equal importance in shaping an effective studio approach.

6.1. Hands-on Experience

Comfortably the most common studio benefit identified by MSc Urban Design students in the MUD-Lab is the hands-on approach that ensures students are not passive in their education, but rather they view themselves as active participants in learning. This predominately applies to timetabled studio sessions led by staff and tutors – wherein short talks are broken up with applied student-led exercises. Students value the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge being delivered from the front of the studio – in an environment where they can work with peers and have instantaneous feedback and support from staff. Many students feel this hands-on practical approach is vital to their understanding, and confidence in applying discipline-specific language and skills, complex analysis techniques and testing out design concepts. This benefit is even more keenly felt when students are being taught software – a learning by doing methodology is recognised by students as critical for their development and confidence.

"My past experiences of university was sitting in a lecture-hall being talked at, I fully get that is important as we need to consume knowledge….but often it can feel very theoretical and our understanding superficial, in studio though we put into practice the theory, we get to immediately have a go at things…I always leave the studio lessons confident I can apply the learning because that is exactly what I have just done. This is never more important than when we are being taught quite difficult techniques or how to present work professionally using things like Illustrator or Photoshop [software]*".* (MUD-Lab Student Focus Group)

There are however risks identified by some students to this hands-on approach – whilst many associate the highly technical and practical studio sessions with real-world practice and experience, some others have commented that it can feel "*artificial*" (Unit Evaluation Survey) or "*lacking in the complexities I would expect in professional practice*" (Unit Evaluation Survey). This is a challenge for educators seeking to provide a real-world experience within a controlled academic setting that ultimately requires 'hypothetical projects' at some level (Cuthbert, 2010).

6.2. Collaborative Opportunities

The ability to collaborate regularly in an environment that encourages team-working and peer-learning makes many students feel that their education is more than a form of knowledge exchange with staff – but is rather a more complex and nuanced experience where individuals believe they get more out when they put more in. Many students fed-back that the studio fosters an atmosphere of constant development, where they not only believe they are learning from others, but that their active participation ensures they take on the role of 'teacher' – a symbiotic system where learning is constant and progress can be inspired from multi-sources. The mostly commonly stated sources being 'staff', 'other students', 'external tutors and practitioners', 'viewing others project work', and 'students studying other disciplines'. It was clear from several focus group discussions that these collaborations are not always viewed as naturally occurring, with a recognition that organisation is key to drive opportunity.

"It is easy to just rely on the small group of mates you make [for feedback and collaborations] *…so having timetabled peer-crits was great, it made me discuss my designs with others I would never have ordinarily approached on the course".* (Student Focus Group)

"Having the chance to discuss our work with external professionals was amazing, having your lecturer give you help is great, but hearing from those in jobs I ultimately want to have myself is so valuable, it made me feel like what I was doing, what I was producing, was going in the right direction and would not just get me a good grade, but hopefully impress employers and get me good job too". (Student Focus Group)

For a small number of students collaboration did bring some negative perceptions, with some arguing that "*certain people* [other students] *definitely hold back their best ideas, or do not fully participate in sharing…they are happy to take from others but not reciprocate*" (Studio Survey). This can lead to "*clear rivalries between certain students*" (Studio Survey), as they compete rather than collaborate (*see* Crowther, 2013). One student also highlighted the potential for those less vocal or outgoing to fall behind – with those perceived as being more confident or outgoing getting the most benefit out of teamworking and feedback beyond the structured components of the course.

6.3. Creative Freedoms

The ability to try different things and make mistakes in a safe-environment was highlighted as a core benefit of the studio approach – many students stated that the studio was a space where they felt comfortable to "*give things a go*" and "*try out different approaches without worrying about looking foolish or getting a poor grade*" (both Student Focus Group). This creative freedom cited by students was related to a number of key aspects of how the studio is set-up and how it relates to the curriculum. Most students surveyed believed that urban design projects required designers willing to innovate and make value judgments in regard contextual response, design quality, and feasibility. It is therefore imperative that they are encouraged to "*try things, fail, and learn from*

why that did not work for that particular place" (Studio Survey) – this productive failure (*see* Kapur, 2016) ensures that students feel time spent in studio is always valuable, regardless of the individual days 'output' in relation to their assigned projects (Fernando, 2007). Others discussed the contrast to other more traditional forms of education during their studies – citing more rigid coursework with fixed parameters and expectations that did not encourage out-of-the-box thinking, and the freedom to employ different methods, such as sketching, modelling, talking - to work through, test, and refine ideas and approaches.

Creative freedom does come with caveats according to some students – many cite a 'fear of failure', or consistent 'failure' leading to concerns over progress and the potential to fall behind peers. Others articulate worries over their ability to be 'creative' in comparison to peers. *"I loved the more structured elements like the analysis and even developing our design briefs…. but the design stuff itself was really challenging for me, others just seemed to have a natural knack [gift] for this…. I found this stage so stressful and felt like I needed more guidance at key points"* (Student Focus Group).

6.4. Feedback and Mentorship

Controlled and consistent feedback was viewed as one of the most tangible and critical components of a successful studio-led model of learning by students. This can be divided into two distinct feedback types – the structured crit and informal relationships. The structured crit was held up as vital to ensure students have clear milestones for their projects/schemes and receive specific, targeted feedback from staff who will be responsible for grading the final submissions. *"Whilst crits are undoubtably the scariest thing we do at university, I could not imagine where my work would be without them – the feedback we get is great and does help make the work better, but it's more they loom large at these key points in the semester and focus your brain to work towards them. It gets you out of the 'messing around' stage and forces you to make decisions and get things on the boards"* (Student Focus Group).

Not all students agree that the crit positively assisted their project development however – with some finding the feedback provided "*overly-subjective*" or "*lacking depth*" (Unit Evaluation Survey). In part, this could be attributed to variations in learning styles, however across several unit-evaluation surveys comments have been recorded that criticise perceived tutor bias that affects the level of feedback received – and feelings of confusion as one tutor may be overly critical of certain aspects of a design, whilst another overlooks these issues or even disagrees with the prior negative feedback – leading to students believing such feedback is arbitrary. Anthony (2002) highlighted this issue in the studio approach – that at times tutors' opinions and perceptions can be at odds with one another.

The informal relationships between tutors and students can be of benefit for a number of reasons – students cite the ability to access consistent and quick feedback in-studio as beneficial in progressing their development, but also in growing relationships with staff which can make them more comfortable in asking for help for example. This more flexible form of feedback often empowers students:

"Seeing the lecturers in the studio most days means conversations become more natural over the year…we can have a joke with them and get to know them better, it breaks down some of the boundaries and you can feel like you are not just being taught, but you are being mentored" (Student Focus Group).

Some students do however feel excluded, at times, from this form of relationship, "*it's clear that some tutors like some students more than others and this is reflected in the time they spend with different people…I do not live very close to the campus so always feel like I am a stranger when I come to studio and do feel I miss out because of it at time*"(Studio Survey). Language can also be an issue raised in regards staff/student relationship development, with some international students

commenting they can feel excluded due to their lack of confidence in conversing more informally in English – putting them at a potential disadvantage in relation to other students.

6.5. Sense of Identity

"The MUD-Lab studio was like my second home... actually maybe my first home as I spend more time there than I did at my flat! My studio mates are like my family now" (Student Focus Group).

"This was one of the hardest years of my life, but it was also maybe the best. I made friends for life – we went through this epic journey together and I couldn't have done it without them" (Unit Evaluation Survey).

"I came to study at University of Manchester, but I left an alumni of the Manchester urban Design LAB. I still carry my MUD-Lab tote bag everywhere I go" (Student Focus Group).

Many studies have illustrated similar student feelings on their studio experience in university (i.e. Pelsmakers et al., 2020; RIBA, 2021). A primary take-away from the MUD-Lab student feedback was a shared feeling that the studio space was "their space" – and this creates a unique culture amongst the cohort. From working together in collaboration, to pushing hard towards deadlines for crits, or final submissions, the collective experience developed bonds that continue long after graduation. Also having a 'banner' (in this case the MUD-Lab) to join together under was valued – a tribal marker within the wider university – further strengthening the feeling that they belonged to a unique and select group.

Whilst the overall feedback across the surveys and focus groups was positive regarding the sense of identity fostered by the MUD-Lab studio – there where a number of warnings stated that may risk this in the future if not managed and considered carefully. These centred around commonly referenced issues including managing workloads, ensuring deadlines did not overlap (RIBA, 2021), encouraging life beyond the studio, and working closely with those with disability or in need of dedicated support (physical or mental). Links to mental health decline related to the studio-approach are well documented (see Oliveira et al., 2020) and must be carefully considered to ensure students avoid stress and burnout as a result of studio culture. One student commented that the MUD-lab hosting student showcase events and publishing student yearbooks each year caused them stress – "seeing the quality of past student work was both inspiring and terrifying...I worried for so long that I could not live up to what I'd seen, it caused me sleepless nights at the start" (Student Focus Group).

7. The MUD-Lab Development: Learning Lessons and Implementing Change

The process of evaluation outlined in this study has resulted directly in a number of adjustments to how design studio is managed and operated within the MUD-Lab – there have been several modifications made over the 5-year period to ensure that student concerns are addressed and that the urban design pedagogy and associated studio approach continues to evolve with contemporary professional practice and emerging challenges facing both urban settings and people. Through a process of reflection on their teaching and scholarship in the context of the urban design studio the authors have identified 5 changes that have been implemented with the express aim of enhancing the studio experience for students and staff alike – these are all the result of lessons learned and could be explored and considered by any studio-led educational setting.

7.1. Working with 'Live' Clients

There are lots of examples of 'live' project integration in design education (see Cuthbert, 2010), but the challenge for educators remains that designing curriculum around such projects can be unsustainable. Such projects often have a limited shelf-life and when completed new projects may require significant curriculum adjustment. 'Live' projects also introduce the complexity of external practices and individuals becoming core to teaching and students outcomes, with inherent challenges in consistency of commitment, familiarity with the teaching framework and ability to engage the students (Kamalipour & Peimani, 2025). At MUD-Lab we have always focused on real-

world sites for student projects, but maintained a strong element of artificiality, with clients played by tutors for example. This approach maintains staff control over projects – increasing consistency and fairness across the cohort – but fails to expose students to real-world complexities and impact. In response to this we set-up an extra-curricular design project approach – where students have the opportunity to work on a 'live' project with a real-world client alongside support from academic staff. An example project is MUD-Lab's collaboration with Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council in the delivery of a new central government funded Design Code for the region. MUD-Lab set up an optional student extra-curricular project wherein students delivered a strategic framework document for two key areas that both informed the subsequent design code and became part of the suite of policy for the council's planning team. Students got the opportunity to put into practice the skills they developed in studio during graded assignments and have a piece of work they contributed directly towards influence design policy and future development. The optional nature of these types of projects ensures students do not feel pressure to be involved, and staff ensure that work on the scheme is organized to avoid interference with curriculum deadlines.

7.2. Exposure to Professional Practice

In addition to the 'live' clients – MUD-Lab has sought out ways to provide students with more exposure to urban design schemes and development happening internationally – to enhance their knowledge and grow their best practice understanding. It is imperative that students recognize the importance of collaborations and other disciplines in the delivery of high-quality schemes – often the studio environment can be singularly focused on the role of the urban designer only (Yavuz Özgür & Çalışkan, 2025). To tackle this a series of new initiatives were introduced at MUD-Lab, with 2 long-term solutions integrated into the studio-based model. Firstly, the use of external practitioners for timetabled 'informal crits' – these crits are not graded and are promoted as specialized feedback opportunities. Sessions are planned where a series of invited external tutors to come into the studio to discuss students work from a different perspective – these sessions aim to provide professionals from fields including architecture, landscape architecture, planning, road/highways, health and wellbeing, and sustainability. Such an approach allows students to receive unique takes on their design schemes – it also enables key learnings on the roles of other disciplines in the production of place. The second initiative was to create a formal platform for external professionals to showcase their own real-world schemes and projects to students – though an organized series of talks and exhibitions under the title of 'MUD-Lab Professional Practice Forum'. This forum allows for the exchange of ideas and approaches and exposes students to international practice and different challenges being faced in different contexts.

7.3. Focus on Critical Thinking – Not Definitive Answers!

Student expectations are often based around the notion that there are 'right' and 'wrong' answers – that their assignments are inherently correct or incorrect. To challenge this perception and encourage more critical thinking and creative freedom a number of changes were made to the MUD-Lab studio approach. Whilst the strategically placed crit model is useful for ensuring students keep to deadlines and work regularly on their assignments – the graded element can cause students to worry about whether they have delivered the 'correct' scheme – by adding in a series of scheduled informal staff surgeries between these crits students are encouraged to be braver in what they seek feedback on – to test and try new ideas and approaches without the fear of losing grades. Model making is also encouraged earlier in the design optioneering or development stage, rather than only at the end design stage – allowing students to more effectively explore solutions within their context to ascertain which options best meets their brief.

Initially the studio approach was deliberately flexible and loose to reflect the desire for more critical thinking – however adapting to incorporate more 'rules' had clear benefits. Practical rule-setting regarding studio opening hours meant students had to leave the studio each evening by 8PM – promoting a better work-life balance, and ensuring students take time to step back from

their work – to reflect and refresh. A new non-credit module (Urban Design Applied Skills) was also developed to focus exclusively on the teaching of software – removing this from the studio-environment and separating the final graphical presentation from the creative thinking and development more clearly.

7.4. A Transparent Process

One of the most significant developments in the MUD-Lab to enhance and improve the studio approach was the development and publication of a comprehensive and accessible bespoke framework for both understanding and practicing urban design in a contextually responsive manner from appraisal to design delivery (Black et al., 2025). This framework was developed in response to our need for a structured, yet flexible, process that enables individuals to develop the core sills necessary to practice urban design as a technical product, to develop projects along a logical pathway that still requires creative approaches, thinking, and commitment. The Applied Urban Design Framework provides clarity on the role of the urban designer, and transparency on the design process undertaken. This has become the template for education in MUD-Lab, and students are able to immediately recognize the process required from start to finish – and have a clear structure to follow at each stage of their projects in studio. It ensures expectations are clear and understood – that key milestones are highlighted and recognized – and assignment requirements are more easily understood. Having such a framework has allowed students to better structure their time in the studio – to appreciate each stage of the process within the wider context. The framework promotes consistency of approach across all projects and assignments and reassures all students that there is a clear mechanism they can adhere too. Having such a framework also allows for grading to be clearer, as staff can pinpoint expectations and students can appreciate what they are required to present – leading to less subjective critiques and a more balanced and targeted approach to feedback.

7.5. A Sense of Self

The danger with promoting and encouraging a culture of teamwork and community identity within the studio setting – is that it risks students becoming homogenized. Much of the criticism of a studio environment in the literature can be attributed to a lack of individual care and attention. Considering the feedback of the MUD-Lab students in this paper, the counters to the benefits of the studio tend to be focused on a lack of appreciation that not everyone will think, act, or feel the same way. To counter this at MUD-Lab there have been a number of different approaches tested that seek to demonstrate to students that they matter as individuals and they have a voice. Beyond the timetabled teaching and scheduled studio sessions there has been an effort to organize and host non-graded trips and tours – often to encourage peer-bonding and allow for more informal discussions to happen between staff and students. These take the form of walking tours in the city, a now annual residential 2-day trip to Newcastle (UK) that aims to allow students to get to know staff and peers better early in the academic year, and even group meals together funded by the MUD-Lab and University. In addition, interventions implemented in response to ongoing evaluation have been made in recent years to focus attention on one-to-one sessions with students, sign up surgeries with tutors that allow students to have more focused time with a staff member to discuss their work and/or their concerns – and later in the year conversations regarding career progression and opportunities. Making these opportunities less informal at key times ensures a more equitable approach that includes all students.

This research itself was in part about ensuring students had a voice in the studio – opportunities to complete specific studio surveys anonymously in addition to the university standard unit evaluations, and focus groups set up to listen and record student experiences and communicate MUD-Lab responses and initiatives to tackle issues that have been raised. In a broader sense university wellbeing policies are being better integrated and incorporated – as well as support offerings regularly communicated in studio – with encouragement to make use of the networks and provisions available (see RIBA, 2021).

8. Conclusion: Benefits vs Risks

This paper has established that the studio plays an integral role in urban design teaching and learning, with recognized benefits from the perspective of both teaching staff and students. The studio-led approach is however complex in its both its benefits and risks – as highlighted through past research demonstrating the problems associated with the studio approach. This paper has further highlighted some of these concerns, and therefore urban design educators must carefully consider how the design studio fits into their teaching and curriculum development and delivery.

The studio-based teaching and learning approach within the MUD-Lab at the University of Manchester was explored through a thematic analysis of feedback gathered from studio teaching staff and postgraduate students enrolled on the MSc Urban Design and International Planning program. The review identified the intended role of the studio from the teaching perspective as core to the urban design pedagogy and assessment and feedback approach. The intention for the studio is driven by its reflection of professional practice processes and delivery of tangible outputs – and its anchor point for a broader design culture. Benefits for students reflected these intentions, valuing the hands-on experience (and yet recognizing the iterative nature of learning and safety of the studio space in this regard). Developing a studio culture is a complex undertaking, but something which allows students not only the opportunity to collaborate with peers, but to develop individually as an urban designer.

Delivering studio should not be the result of tradition or expectation, it must be more robustly rationalized and justified, shaped to ensure maximum benefit for the students involved, with the risks (real and perceived) mitigated as best as possible through ongoing studio practice. The studio is an approach that must support the curriculum – not shape and define it – it should be designed and delivered in an appropriate way to maximize the intended learning outcomes of the course. All involved, staff/student/external practitioner should be aware of how it is to operate, with a consistency of approach and agreed expectations. This requires engagement and communication – in particular between staff and students – understanding the experience of those engaging with the studio is critical to truly ascertain its usefulness, to enhance its impact, and create a positive environment. It is an ongoing process, a constant evolution, just as the field of urban design adapts and responds to emerging global and local challenges facing people and places, so must urban design education adjust to remain relevant. The urban design studio must reflect such changes if it is to remain a critical component in bridging the education-practice gap and developing the next generation of urban designers ready to make a positive impact on the world.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

Ethics Committee Approval

Ethics committee permission is not required.

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