



Hydrocity: An International Collaborative Urban Lab between Manchester and Riga

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Abstract

The Contextual Urbanism Lab at Manchester School of Architecture explores and develops future Urban Design Visions and engages in collaborative design work with other schools of architecture. In the 2023-24 academic year design work was undertaken in collaboration with students from the Latvian Riseba University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Architecture and Design (Riseba FAD) for the repurposing of Kipsala Island, located on the west bank of the River Daugava in Riga and for the “Wirral Waters” regeneration area in Birkenhead (U.K). Through these design projects and the international experience, the students gained a full understanding of the opportunities presented by their sites to develop proposals for the reinvention of new, distinctive, and sustainable waterside districts at the heart of historic European cities. Having identified a site and personal manifesto, students were asked to test their ideas against their specific conditions. This detailed analysis led to comparative studies developed in both schools. The findings, contingent upon the different sizes and structures of the two schools, established a series of parameters to frame both the student and teacher research and raised questions on how the methods inherent in design synthesis highlighted a path towards either a professional or academic trajectory.

The relevance of this study must be found in the international exchange between different architecture schools, which reflects on the opportunity to prepare Master’s students for their future employment, in academia or in practice, using a collaborative urban lab as formative expertise.

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Keywords

Urban Design; Collaboration; Pedagogical Innovation; Sustainability; Regeneration

1. Introduction

The regeneration of the urban industrial waterfront has gathered pace in European and North American cities since the mid-20th century, with varying degrees of success, the notable origin being the concept of the festival marketplace established by Benjamin Thompson around Faneuil Hall in Boston in the 1960s. (Frieden & Sagalyn, 1991) After this legacy, the question arises: How can the emerging generation of 21st-century urbanists refine and rethink approaches to waterfront regeneration that maximize the opportunities for future-facing, sustainable, distinctive, and environmentally robust place-making to strengthen the future resilience, purpose, function, and well-being of our cities? In 2023 -24 students from the Manchester School of Architecture (MSA) and the Riseba University of Applied

Sciences, Faculty of Architecture and Design (Riseba FAD) embarked upon an initial year-long collaborative studio design process in which each student group developed master planning and design proposals for sites in the partner university's city region to explore these goals. Our collaborators at Riseba for this academic year were Professors Rudolfs Dainis Smits, Efe Duyan, Helena Gutmane, and Jonas Buechel.

Riga's Hydrocity is one example of a wider project developed within the Architecture and Urbanism Master Studios. The studio runs in three semesters, divided into 5 Urban labs, each dealing with a specific urbanism topic in Barcelona, Berlin, Karystos, and Manchester. As a specific case of investigation, the cooperation between Riseba and MSA has been developed with the Contextual Urbanism Lab. Therefore, in conjunction with the above, this paper wants to define Urban Labs' pedagogical strategies as a foundation to retrace a roadmap to resilient cities worldwide.

Post-industrial inner urban waterside sites were selected in both Latvia and the U.K., which embodied the challenges and opportunities for reinvention and repurposing through sustainable development that could be relevant to comparable sites in other cities and countries in the future.

Key questions and objectives were woven into and underpinned by the studio brief and process.

- How can international student collaboration enhance future approaches to regeneration and urbanism?
- What can students from differing cultures and backgrounds learn from one another to strengthen their understanding of creating new and repurposed sustainable communities?
- How can the learning be shared and disseminated to enrich future sustainable development and regeneration approaches?
- What can each school learn from the others?

The paper follows the outline below. Firstly, the commonalities and variances of the site are described. Then, the pedagogical conditions in each school and the appropriation of remote learning and teaching strategies for new design and research methods are discussed in the literature review. Having established their context, the methodological section follows where the specifics of the studio structure are outlined. A discussion of student participation and the impact on their work follows before the pedagogical results are placed in context. The paper closes with a discussion of the ongoing and future collaboration currently being undertaken in the second year of the collaborative studio.

1.1. Sites - Commonalities and Variances

Cities and sites in each country were selected that presented both commonalities and differences, partly to enable comparison of the processes and outputs of students' work upon completion.

The Riga and Birkenhead historic waterside districts share similarities in their former industrial use and exciting potential to be repurposed as resilient new places. Each is positioned geographically toward the present edges of the northern European economic center and set within otherwise contrasting economic, political, social, and environmental contexts and constructs. Similarly, while all cities are subject to continuous change and evolution, each study area is positioned on the regeneration delivery timeline at a different juncture.

A. Riga

Post-industrial sites along the River Daugava (as seen in Figure 1) present extensive tracts of both vacant and underdeveloped land within the heart of a European capital city of 630,000 people. The sites lie at the interface between a city centre UNESCO World Heritage Site and the low-density and shrinking 20th-century suburbs beyond that enclose Riga within its striking green setting of lakes and forests. The River Daugava is at the early stages in its journey to identify how its regeneration can best shape and contribute to the establishment of a new future vision, identity, and purpose for Riga, a city experiencing depopulation following social and economic change associated with the establishment of post-Soviet independence and E.U. membership in recent decades (Riga 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy of Riga, Municipality of Riga 2014). However, recent exciting visions for the creation of new high-density, mixed-use, and environmentally progressive waterside urban districts presented through masterplans for Riga Port City and Riga Waterfront, developed by private sector design and developer teams in association with

Riga City Council, outline how potential change might look (Riga Port City, Hosaya Schaefer Architects 2022), whilst Rail Baltica offers the promise of new 21st-century international rail connectivity to unlock progressive regeneration initiatives further.

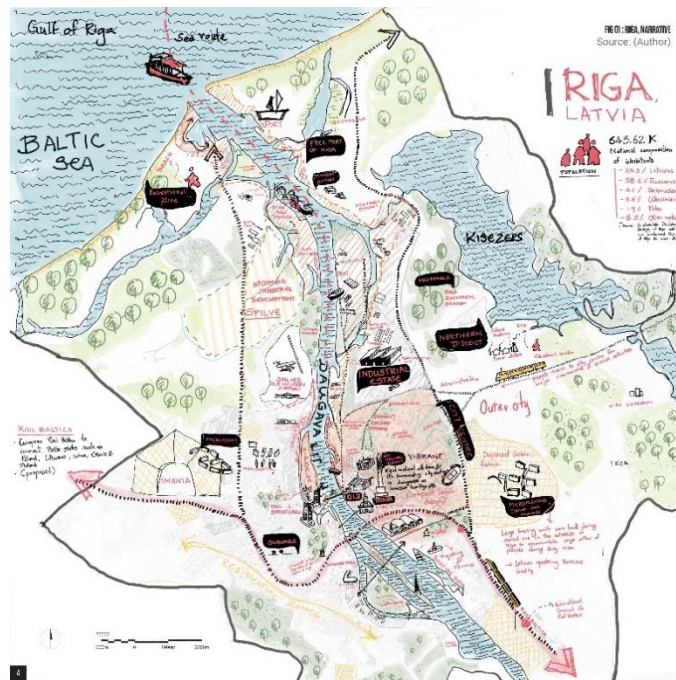


Figure 1: Riga Map. A sketch drawing highlighting the city's urban resources. (Drawing by Stud. Mageswari Arulnathan, 2023.24)

B. Birkenhead

Birkenhead is a town of 300,000 people in the Northwest of the U.K. (as seen in Figure 2) where vacant dockside sites that once represented the working heart of a wider planned Victorian model town on the green Wirral peninsula present 21st-century regeneration opportunities. Dock areas were unlocked historically for port use by the advent of new Victorian access tunnels beneath the River Mersey, as an expansion of Liverpool's Docks presents similar opportunities for creative reinvention and repurposing. Dockside regeneration along the Mersey already has a forty-year legacy, most notably around the Albert Dock in Liverpool, which was part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site until 2021. Birkenhead Docks lies at the heart of this wider and progressive vision developed and shared by both private and public sector initiatives for the creation of the ambitious Wirral Waters, an internationally significant mixed-use and high-density regeneration initiative by Peel Developments, coordinated with the complementary regeneration of surrounding neighborhoods in the local Council's Birkenhead Framework 2040 (Birkenhead 2040 Framework, Consultation Draft, Wirral Council, March 2021) and reflected in the Wirral Local Plan 2012-2037 (Submission Draft, Wirral Council, May 2022).



Figure 2: Birkenhead Map. Drawing by Heritage Framework Plan. (Wirral Waters Strategic Regeneration Framework Vision Statement. Produced by Peel Holdings to support the outline planning application. June 2021, p.38)

2. Literature Review

2.1. Distance as a form of knowledge

The cooperative urban lab's experience between MSA and Riseba raised an additional argument on the relevance of working at a distance, as we assert that distance is not a limit but a new form of knowledge (Yaneva, 2023). After the COVID pandemic in 2020, the world realized that space and time can be truly abstract conditions in which certain activities can be easily shared more efficiently. The genius loci theorized by Norberg-Schulz (1980) as a celebration of a place in a specific space and time can be reinterpreted by merging it with this contemporary concept of distance.

As mentioned above, one of the lab's main achievements is educating international students on investigating project sites by reinterpreting data and maps, using distance as a positive resource rather than a negative impact. It is well known that young architects can be asked to develop project ideas without site visits when facing projects in international architecture practice.

Thinking about the Contextual Urbanism Lab as a laboratory of ideas means developing a specific multimodal pedagogical approach in which master students can advocate the sense of distance not anymore as a limit but as a new form of knowledge and exchange opportunity that sets out a roadmap to resilient cities worldwide.

The above reflection identified within the Architecture Studio a clear pedagogy pathway in which the role of Urban labs can be experienced as a Laboratory of Urbanism extended in different domains. Students from different parts of the world engaged in a unique experience, followed by two opportunities. The first consists of a global approach to urban challenges, working in cooperation with a different cohort of academics and practitioners based on diverse Architecture and Urbanism skills. The second consists of presenting the students with an effective and diverse site experience around the world, addressing sustainable cities and community goals: making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. (United Nations, 2015)

The main objective consists of training international students in building awareness and disseminating worldwide-specific outputs concerning resilience, urbanism, and climate change, defined by consistently envisioning cities and urban crises in different parts of the world. As an example to raise in this discussion, in 2009, the European Climate Foundation based at Den Haag assigned to the international office AMO a research study: Roadmap 2050: A Practical Guide to a Prosperous, Low-carbon Europe (OMA/AMO, 2015) Reinier De Graaf and Laura Baird led the entire research; the main vision consists in developing a new geography by drawing new maps introducing an EU-wide decarbonised power grid by 2050. The work developed by AMO's team shows a map of the main European energy resources as an alternative to the carbon emissions that have been extensively produced in Europe until now. The starting point highlighted by the team is the role of the Industrial Revolution, which saw, on one side, great technological innovation but, on the other, a massive amount of fossil fuel use. The Road Map 2050 demonstrates how different nations sharing different energy resources can achieve mutual benefits. On more than one occasion, the AMO/OMA office pointed out how climate change and resilience can improve worldwide by accepting a coexistence of differences between different geographical areas (Biraghi, 2024). The focus for developing a collaborative lab between MSA and Riga is the role post-industrial regeneration will have in the development of a low-carbon urban future across the continent and beyond. This pedagogy and methodology study reflects the importance of defining a Master's program as a worldwide inclusive studio. The impact of this research saw the opportunity to extend the training students' capacity in a new era of sustainable urbanism, developed with specific expertise. The Roadmap 2050 became a paradigm of a new approach to creating consistency and awareness among future students.

How does the learning environment, such as the Urban Lab experience, share and disseminate information to enrich future sustainable development and innovate the regeneration approach?

To answer the above question, we started developing a sense of working through a multimodal pedagogy in our students, disseminating among different students' cultural experiences a diversified set of skills and regeneration approach from a diverse background. The staff shared the same approach; the program has a diversified court of academics with different experiences coming from four continents. They are mainly part-time from a practice environment and full-time from academia, sharing the experience of a sustainable approach delivered in the past year

in the form of a design approach and lectures. As a specific case, Contextual Urbanisms, jointly with RISEBA, decided to work on retracing a sustainable approach to exploring river waterfront projects in Birkenhead and Riga (Smith, 2021). The logic in which the urban lab has been shaped redraws the nature of the efficiency of sharing and acting in a sort of multimodal Studio culture.

Multimodal pedagogies are based on the idea that meanings are made, disseminated and interpreted through many representational resources made and modes as sound, music, gesture, space, color, facial expression, body posture and movement (Smith, 2021, p. 17). As a specific frame of investigation, our teaching environment is based on the same approach, engaging students by facing them with the meaning of a sustainable approach with multiple resources from the different cities and cultures where students belong.

Each student's skills and background became a reference point in disseminating and sharing good studio culture and sustainable practices. The comparison between the multimodal pedagogy and the multiplicity of resources offered by the lab exposes the Contextual Urban Lab to a series of opportunities in which students exchange, highlighting the opportunity of redrawing new sustainable approaches across different nations.

In this frame of investigation, dissemination, future sustainability, and a new regeneration approach are integrative parts of a progressive collective learning environment (Park, 2020). A new form of urbanism can be developed by recognizing the importance of the multiplicity of teaching resources within a cross-cultural collaboration urban lab. The future of sustainability is included in a new studio culture where geographical boundaries are no longer considered limited but rather as opportunities and learning resources.

3. Methodology and Analysis

Our Combined Urban Lab explored the diverse opportunities and challenges for the Riga and Birkenhead sites through the studio collaboration under the theme of Edge City (Farley & Roberts, 2012) and urban studies undertaken at the sequentially increasing focus of city, neighbourhood and site scales. The project spanned across a number of different parameters within the two schools. Foremost among them was the relative disparity in size between the institutions, MSA having ten times the number of enrolled students as Riseba FAD. Secondly, about 30 postgraduate students participated in Manchester, while approximately 40 students from Riga, divided between postgraduates and undergraduates, participated. In Manchester, there was a year-long project, while in Riga, a research phase by master's students was used for peer-to-peer teaching of undergraduates, with a small number of master's students returning to the Birkenhead sites for their master's thesis design projects. This method has already been replicated in the current academic year (2024-25), further establishing the collaborative relationship and developing new research fields connected to the project regarding contextual urbanism.

Students tested and developed well-established urban design and masterplanning methodologies in developing proposals for repurposed sustainable urban districts employed across both schools and their respective sites, and from initial 'shared' briefs. This research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Subsequent variances in the design process and approach between the schools were then noted and reflected upon. The design methodology is rooted in an analysis of existing site conditions as overlain and measurable 'layers', the methodology informed by integrating Ian McHarg's physical principles of Ecological Determinism (McHarg, 1969) with the human and placemaking values and considerations set out in Moudon's 'nine areas of concentration' (Moudon, 1992). The resulting methodology comprised four key considerations:

- Green and blue

By exploring the edges, boundaries and interfaces between the city and its landscape setting, between urban districts and natural systems and waterways, between islands and the mainland, and between buildings and their public realm, sustainable, ecologically effective and distinctive green and blue networks can be developed within which built form is framed. (Beatley, 2014; Steiner et al., 2019).

- Movement

By considering the edge and relationship between distinctive contained neighbourhoods and the movement networks that transcend boundaries and connect them, future-facing mobility systems and transit-oriented development can

enhance both urban function and the placemaking experiential qualities of arrival, departure and the visual journey between places (Calthorpe, 1993).

- Built Form

Meaningful solutions can be explored by examining and reflecting on societal and built heritage, the collective memory of a place, and the liminal space between past and present. The optimal mix of both new and repurposed building and land uses that embraces and propels new learning and innovation districts, that establish adaptable future forms of housing, and that seedbed fully integrated community infrastructure can also promote design excellence and celebrate the genius loci (Katz and Wagner, 2014).

- Archipelagic strategy

Exploring urban morphology through the lens of an archipelagic strategy, interrupted city patterns can be investigated as an urban palimpsest, reinterpreting multiple environmental complexities. The archipelagic strategy reflects the idea that urban differences can coexist, developing new networks and urban ecosystems (Ungers et al., 2013; Stephens, Martínez-San Miguel, 2024).



Figure 3: The class in Manchester. Online collaborative presentation between MSA and RISEBA (@maaumsa via @fad_architecture_school, 8th February 2024)

The methodology employed in the Hydrocity project between MSA and Riseba was structured to facilitate comprehensive collaboration and creative exchange across different academic and cultural contexts. This section outlines how the collaboration was organised and executed to achieve the project’s goals of exploring sustainable urban regeneration at post-industrial waterfront sites in Riga and Birkenhead. The collaboration between MSA and Riseba was designed to integrate seamlessly, treating the two institutions as a unified entity for the project’s duration. This approach ensured that students and educators from both sides were actively engaged in a reciprocal learning process, sharing insights, methodologies, and cultural perspectives throughout the academic year. The primary activities included:

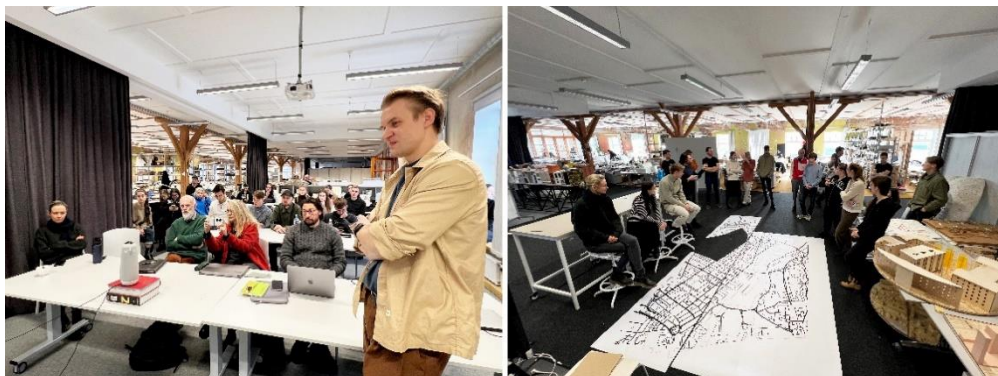


Figure 4: The class in Riga. Online collaborative presentation between MSA and RISEBA, (@maaumsa via @fad_architecture_school, 8th February 2024)

- Before site visits - Organising Tutorials, Lectures, and Seminars

Regular sessions were conducted online and in person, alternating between Riga and Birkenhead. These sessions featured lectures by faculty members from each institution aimed at providing foundational knowledge and context-specific to the sites under study.

- Site Visits and Interactive Workshops

Integral to the methodology were site visits where students could be exposed to the physical context of their projects. These visits included guided tours, discussions with local stakeholders, and interactive workshops encouraging collaborative problem-solving and design exploration.

- Feedback and Review Process

Formal review sessions (as seen in Figure 3) marked key points in the project's development. These sessions enabled students to present their work-in-progress to peers and faculty from both institutions, receiving constructive feedback that supported their understanding and improved their final design proposals.

- Mixed Group Dynamics

Mixed groups were formed during tutorials and workshops (as seen in Figure 4) to foster cross-cultural understanding and diverse perspectives. This intentional mixing of students from the two different contexts encouraged dialogue, challenged assumptions, and broadened the scope of creative solutions proposed. (Qu et al., 2019).

- Urban Lab consultant

An Urban Lab consultant model introduced expert perspectives at key project stages, enabling students to incorporate specialised knowledge into their design processes. This approach provided an applied understanding of urbanism's complex multi-actor dynamics (Healey, 2006).

The online collaboration between MSA and Riseba was designed to represent a pioneering approach to international education. This innovative format aimed to showcase a new way of learning and teaching that expands opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and exploration. The online format was employed as a deliberate strategy to enhance the educational experience, and it was designed to explore the benefits of digital tools and platforms, offering a flexible, accessible, and interactive learning environment. The ambition behind this approach was to transcend traditional educational boundaries and create a richer, more inclusive learning experience. Throughout the academic year, the online sessions were carefully structured to maximise clarity and effectiveness in delivering content and encouraging student interaction. Each online session began with a structured introduction outlining the agenda, objectives, and expected outcomes. This approach provided a clear framework for the session, helping students to understand the focus and purpose of the day's activities. Furthermore, interactive tools were utilised to facilitate active participation and ensure meaningful engagement with the content and fellow students.

The collaborative sessions were delivered by faculty members and designed to be both informative and engaging, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Lectures were tailored to provide a contextual understanding of theoretical frameworks in relation to the specific challenges and opportunities presented by the urban regeneration projects in Riga and Birkenhead. This approach helped students relate theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios. In terms of feedback, sessions were conducted via video conferencing, allowing for detailed critique and discussion of the students' work.

3.1. Students' Collaboration and Future Approaches to Urbanism

Several key themes and objectives guided the methodology throughout the collaboration. The focus on cultural exchange allowed students to examine how diverse cultural perspectives influence urban design and regeneration strategies, improving their own approaches with insights from international peers. The project emphasised sustainability and innovation, aiming to reimagine waterfront regeneration through practices that address 21st-century challenges like climate change and urban resilience (Sharma et al., 2024). Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on knowledge sharing and dissemination, with efforts to document and distribute collaborative learnings, including

research findings, design proposals, and critical reflections through academic publications, exhibitions, and public presentations.

The benefits of studio working through the international student collaboration, three key opportunities were identified and explored through which future approaches to regeneration and urbanism could be enhanced. Firstly, the importance of students working collaboratively in a shared studio environment became apparent, and the value of this in shaping students' outlook for developing future-facing, international, holistic and shared understandings of how social, environmental and economic factors can shape future international approaches to progressive, sustainable development.

It is recognised that studio teaching in urban design has undergone a resurgence in urban design and planning courses since the 1990s and can offer highly effective experiential learning processes as an effective means of embracing global sustainable development issues and approaches, as noted by Paul Jones (Jones, 1980).

Both Riga and Birkenhead are urban centres experiencing significant social, economic and environmental change, and both seek to establish new 'visions' for their respective future repurposing. Through direct studio collaboration with the Latvian students, Manchester students were able to develop insights into how public and private sector organisations in Riga are identifying and defining future Visions and themes for Riga's role and USP as a key City within Europe. The Riga-based students benefited similarly by developing shared insights, approaches, and knowledge-sharing around regeneration visions developed for Birkenhead.

These shared approaches and insights students attain through a blended sequence of in-person and virtual studio sessions provide effective tools and outlooks that students can apply to positively and creatively inform sustainable urban development initiatives in other cities globally.

A second key opportunity arose through interaction and collaboration between international students from groups that vary in many ways, being from differing cultural backgrounds, professional disciplines, and groups with differing levels of urban design experience. Though based in Manchester for the term of their studies, MSA students, for example, were predominantly from South Asian and Southeast Asian backgrounds, whilst RISEBA students are mainly from Latvia. Whilst it is recognised that group work for urbanism, students can play an important role in mimicking the' multi-actor or inter-disciplinary nature of future collaborative professional consultant teams (Qu, Chen, Rooij, & de Jong, 2019), the benefits of such collaboration are heightened when considered against the context of increasingly global collaboration and approaches required for the future in developing new solutions to sustainable urban and regional design challenges.

A third key area of investigation that arose as a direct result of the international collaborative working methods employed through the studio was an exploration of the relative benefits, or otherwise, of developing standard design processes for students from both schools to share in common, as a community of practice (Van Dooren et al., 2014).

The extent to which a shared studio brief, comprising a generic sequence of urbanism tasks and outputs deployed in the same way to student groups in both Riga and Manchester, would be beneficial and could potentially encourage the development of effective 'shared' design approaches and solutions within the subject area of urbanism that might otherwise be considered to be more instinctively creative and individualistically expressive, presented an interesting discourse.

The interactive studio experience helped students to discuss, gain valuable insights and develop working design methods into how working as collaborative international teams on common cross-boundary planning and design briefs can simultaneously allow the incorporation of creative expression that celebrates the individual, their background and varied experiences within the group. Understanding the balance between the parallel objectives of (a) working efficiently and effectively to allow the delivery of projects with shared briefs across international boundaries and teams whilst (b) encouraging and embedding individualistic creative expression that celebrates diverse cultural factors and sense of place, will be critical to the success of future global urbanism Practice.

Students from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds can significantly augment each other's understanding of creating sustainable communities, as seen in the collaboration between Manchester School of Architecture (MSA)

and Riseba University. Initially, students in this initiative perceived clear cultural distinctions between their groups, yet as their teamwork progressed, a “blending effect” emerged, helping them shift focus from these differences toward their shared goals in sustainable design (Yang, Olesova, & Richardson, 2010). Through this collaboration, students integrated varying cultural approaches to urban development, gaining insights that helped them develop more resilient and adaptable solutions for both new and repurposed spaces.

Cultural influences played a foundational role in this collaboration. Students from MSA, primarily from South and Southeast Asia, often approached design discussions conservatively, while their European peers from RISEBA tended to be more direct and self-expressive. Such differences are common in intercultural settings: while the Asian students’ diplomatic style reflects a cultural emphasis on harmony, the European students’ directness may represent a cultural preference for straightforwardness (Le Baron, 2003). These dynamics emphasise the importance of culturally responsive teaching, where educators model effective communication techniques honouring diverse backgrounds (Kim & Bonk, 2002). Providing clear communication guidelines, for example, can help students navigate potential conflicts and enhance group cohesion (Murray & McConachy, 2018).

Cross-cultural collaboration offers unique learnings in terms of community design needs and practices. In projects focused on urban regeneration in Riga and Birkenhead, students utilised both local knowledge and international perspectives, critically examining universal versus site-specific challenges. MSA students, for instance, brought a perspective rooted in high-density urban contexts, while RISEBA students contributed insights on post-Soviet urban spaces, resulting in enriched, multifaceted design solutions. This collaboration developed a global mindset among students, encouraging flexible and adaptable approaches to sustainable design. Working on common design briefs, students experimented with “generic versus bespoke” strategies, balancing standardisation with cultural customisation, a dynamic emphasised in studies on international design processes (Van Dooren et al., 2014). Students learned how shared solutions can simultaneously respect unique cultural contexts by navigating this balance.

The collaborative studio environment proved instrumental, especially in urban design, where experiential learning plays a central role (Jones, 1980). Digital tools created a virtual studio, enabling active interaction and continuous feedback despite geographical distances. Structuring these sessions to promote clarity and engagement offered students practical insights into collaborative planning and iterative design methods—skills essential for future professional practice. (Quayle et al., 2025)

Finally, documenting and sharing the outcomes of these collaborations through research, presentations, and publications extended their impact beyond the immediate group, providing valuable resources for wider academic and professional communities. This approach demonstrates the power of knowledge-sharing to shape sustainable urban futures, ensuring that the lessons learned benefit a global audience.

The methodology employed in the Hydrocity project facilitated a dynamic and productive collaboration between MSA and Riseba as institutions. By integrating theoretical learning with practical application across international boundaries, students were able to explore complex urban issues and propose innovative solutions that contribute to the future sustainability and resilience of Riga and Birkenhead.

4. Results

One of the key factors that each school has learnt from each other is how relationships might be established between British and European architecture schools post-Brexit. After a very productive period of over two decades of enthusiastic participation in various aspects of the Erasmus programme, Brexit has resulted in the curtailment of such collaboration. Manchester School of Architecture had many links with Barcelona, Berlin, Kassel, Lyon, Marseilles, Milan, Palermo, Paris and Venice, for example. These relationships lasted over several years, either in the form of student exchanges or through participation in intensive programmes. They impacted the programmes in each participating university, leading to a sharing of contexts, knowledge and pedagogical methods. For the staff in Manchester, this fulfilled an imperative to be internationally active as a means of enhancing the research environment, and for students, it broadened their experience of the teaching environment to an international scale. An Erasmus Intensive Workshop, such as ‘Archaeology’s Places and Contemporary Uses’ between 2009 and 2012, as well as

producing research by design proposals for real-world problems, built up the networks of academics and the future work connections of students and young professionals in architecture and other disciplines. (Vanore, 2010).

Such experiences' fleeting and intangible impact should not be seen as having little worth. They are the fundamental architectural and urban education activity in a co-dependent world. In recognition of this global ambition, for example, the Royal Institute of British Architects validates nearly as many architecture courses outside the United Kingdom as it does within it. Maintaining that international focus after Brexit was mainly seen through the lens of the profession, but education played a significant role in creating that environment. (RIBA, 2017) While non-EU activities, including enrolment and exchange, have increased in recent years in Manchester as internationally attractive courses have expanded (notably the MA in Architecture and Urbanism), activities with our nearest neighbours have declined. This new relationship between Manchester and Riga should be seen as part of relearning the relationship with a European partner, where each school is exposed to the different sizes and complexities of teaching in each institution, although physical contexts and working practices are not that different in ambition. The results of this research must be explored in pedagogy through the collaborative Urban Studio instrument. The impact on the participating students was education for their future careers as internationally resilient designers. The project work of both cohorts of students was disseminated through public exhibitions in Riga (March 2024) and Manchester (June 2024) and in academic and professional publications (Duyan et al., 2024; Quayle et al., 2025). Consequently, this paper finds significance in its speculative approach to how an international collaborative urban lab has been a fruitful and active research pedagogy investigation that amplified architecture and urbanism students' experience.

5. Discussion

One of the discussions that deserves attention must be raised in terms of project constraints; both schools had to deal with the difficulties of the scale to which the final outcomes must refer. The Birkenhead projects produced by students in Riga focused on the larger urban planning and landscape scale. In contrast, the outcomes of the Manchester projects produced for Riga sites raised a number of issues regarding the scalability of urban strategies and architectural scale. The continuity of this process of nesting scales requires different skills, which, on many occasions, highlighted some limitations of this study. Consequently, one of the challenges was engaging students with interdisciplinary consultancy offered by external expertise. Introducing a specific urban consultancy as external expertise made the urban project realistic regarding architectural decisions. Some of the urban regeneration topics addressed by the students, like the river waterfront, the infrastructure and green systems, required interaction with experts. This level of communication guarantees a more specific adaptation of students' research interests into an architecture design solution.

From the perspective of the immediate future of this research, the tighter focus of the experimental sites for the following academic year encourages the students to read the distinct morphology of each place. In the academic year 2024-25, central Riga and Holt Town in Manchester were chosen in reaction to the previous sites so that less generalised solutions might be produced which draw on the particular heritage of each place, the Hanseatic and nineteenth-century heritage of Riga and the industrial context of Manchester. The developing collaboration thus integrates into the histories of the sites by addressing the fragmented urban forms of post-Soviet Riga and post-industrial Manchester. These developments in the pedagogical collaboration have been framed by further online critique sessions and field trips by students from the two cohorts.

6. Conclusion

As an educational experience confronted with remote locations both physically and culturally, this exchange of student experience provides the foundation for future collaborations at personal and institutional levels. Students from different non-European backgrounds who were enrolled at one European institution collaborated successfully with those at another, providing a simulation of the globalised working practices in architecture and urbanism that technology facilitates. The direct culmination of these working strategies and honing the types of compatible contexts towards joint research projects is an ambition that this pedagogical experience helps establish for future academic years. It promotes the idea that contextual urbanism, in its variety and specificity, is of global concern and that it provides a stimulus towards the sustainable ideal of thinking globally but acting locally. The collaboration between

MSA and Riga urban labs draws the first educational leadership with the ambition to build a new roadmap for architecture and urbanism students who are facing unprecedented architecture and urban challenges.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that there is no competing interest.

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