

Urban Design London

A training programme on urban design

Overview

Effective change needs to be led by skilled practitioners. The 2004 Egan report's identification of a skills shortfall amongst Urban Design professionals reflected the approach undertaken by Urban Design London. It offered courses and training to widen public professionals' understanding of urban design. The courses have received widespread support from both participants and stakeholders, and students have moved on to invest a more knowledgeable approach to urban design projects.

An audit by Urban Design London in 2005, highlighted a lack of skills in the urban design/sustainable communities disciplines. The deficit was universal, affecting planners, highway engineers, councillors and housing officers etc. Such failure could only lessen the comfort, safety and accessibility expected in good urban development. Urban Design London (UDL) worked in partnership with other stakeholders, to overcome this skills gap, by offering an eclectic education programme.

UDL offered support, training and networking opportunities to help everyone involved share best practice, ask for advice, and learn. It provided a catalogue of workshops, masterclasses - and subsequently e-learning, with both in-house and in-the-workplace courses available. Sessions are designed to support different levels of skills, but each one is aimed at extending students' understanding of the role they can play in achieving better designed places.

The sessions have generated encouraging support from students. Overall feedback shows them improving skills and gaining a better understanding of the role urban design plays in building sustainable communities. As a result students are more likely to remain engaged with local regeneration challenges and invest their improved knowledge into good urban design. All of which leads to local London communities enjoying better quality places.

Summary

Urban Design London (UDL) wanted to raise skills amongst professionals to develop a better understanding of urban design generally and create a community network of design aware practitioners.

- A skills audit carried out in 2005 found a lack of design skills amongst planners, councillors, housing officers and highways engineers,
- The learning programme was aimed at a range of professional disciplines and included activities such as seminars, masterclasses, team events and events to show people how to apply their new understanding of urban design in their daily work.

- Feedback has been positive. Benefits to individuals included skills development, increased confidence, enhanced motivation, better networks.
- 800 learning experiences, were provided to participants from 84 organisations, in just 6 months

Background

A survey carried out in 2005 demonstrated that there was a lack of skills in the urban design/sustainable communities area and a danger that the agenda would fail to be effectively developed further.

The skills deficit was found to be wide ranging with planners, highway engineers, councillors and housing officers all failing to have an understanding of the basic principles and tools needed to deliver good urban design. Transport for London (the main sponsor of UDL's programme) did a Star Competence Programme, covering 3000 staff, that set competency requirements. The establishment of such targets was a big catalyst for the Learning Laboratory project.

UDL talked to users and came up with a strategic document that set out the needs (competences required), target audiences and delivery mechanism.

The Project

Urban Design London (UDL) was established as a network organisation to help all London authorities achieve better-designed environments. It offered support, training and networking opportunities to help all involved share best practices, ask for advice and learn.

UDL was supported by London Councils, Transport for London (TfL), London Development Agency (LDA), and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE).

The programme offered a suite of training activities targeted at built environment professionals these included:

- Seminars for built environment professionals, aiming to ensure participants understand urban design principles and the value of good design.
- Masterclasses for urban designers and design champions looking at specific issues in more depth by exploring topical issues that are vital to the creation of sustainable communities.
- Learning @ Work showing people how to use their understanding of urban design within day to day work.
- Team Briefings and network events delivered to whole teams in their offices providing basic information on themes such as sustainable design and construction.

By taking this approach it provided advanced skills and support in both the generic skills needed (e.g. visioning, leadership, communication, team working etc) as well as those of the profession (planning, architecture, urban design etc) to tackle sustainable communities initiatives.

The Impact

The programme has generated benefits both for participants and their sponsor organisations.

The participants have raised their awareness and improved their day-to-day ability to deliver better quality places in London. They have also gained a better understanding of Urban Design and its importance for building sustainable communities. On a personal level, students have increased confidence improved motivation in their everyday jobs. The increased networking opportunities have also encouraged a new-found ability to get on and do things without having to wait for help.

For the sponsors, apart from the obvious benefits of increasing skills and capacity in their organisations, better trained staff are more likely to stay at the Boroughs and remain engaged with the local urban regeneration/design challenges. Improved training also improves the chance of staff feeling a greater sense of job satisfaction. Perhaps most importantly, the partners have made sure that stronger sustainability principles are integrated into good urban design.

#The programme is also quietly satisfied with its progress. It's not that the training was especially novel but it's reach was extensive. The outputs from the project have shown a high degree of effectiveness in delivering the objectives of the training. All seminars, masterclasses, site visits and learning at work sessions have been well attended. In the 6 months from Sept 07 to March 08, the project provided 800 individual learning experiences, and 32 events. It reached learners from 84 organisations including 32 of London's 33 boroughs.

#There has also been positive feedback from the training feedback forms and face-to-face interviews. These have revealed a very positive view on the value and effectiveness of the training programme offered by UDL.

The general consensus has been very positive with particularly positive feedback on the value of the masterclass sessions. Participants generally felt that there would be a demand for more of these - possibly one a month. In fact the project has already grown from 5 masterclasses a year to stage 10, in Jan 09.

In the organiser's words:

"This effort provided a dramatic kick start to overcome the urban design skills shortage in London."

Former trainees have commented:

"The whole programme is really good but especially the masterclasses which have been excellent"

“The networking opportunities that the UDL programmes offer are better value than many other similar programmes”

“I found UDL training programmes excellent value for money.”

Lessons Learned

The ‘masterclass’ concept has worked very well being pitched at those with some understanding of basic urban design/regeneration and of the sustainable communities agenda and who need to be addressing key regeneration/sustainability issues with regard to the design of schemes.

Another unique feature is the ‘learning at work’ approach – designed to address local needs, issues and aspirations and sessions taken into the workplace and which can be delivered to an audience of cross departmental or multidisciplinary practitioners.

The video reproductions of the masterclasses and seminars provides an excellent opportunity for transferring the learning to a wider audience. Practitioners from as far a field as Hong Kong have been downloading video material from the UDL web site!

The UDL model for a training programme has proved to be very successful in reaching its intended audience but there is a clear recognition that in running such programmes there is a need to be very flexible and to be able to respond immediately to feedback.

For example the timings of seminars were changed in response to feedback from participants in order to accommodate more participants.

The running of masterclasses is a very effective way of stimulating an audience into some ‘out of the box’ thinking and of ensuring that the training is both imaginative yet focused. Videoing the masterclasses is an effective way of disseminating the learning.

Best bit of advice for running a similar learning programme.....

Establishing a single point of contact within the London Boroughs, a main target audience for UDL, and using this to firm up the logistics for attendance is one of the single factors that helped to streamline the organisation of events and also helped with ‘building relationships’, a key component of sustaining successful training programmes. In addition, sister links were established with Borough streets teams which has also proved to be very useful.

Reference

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<http://www.urbandesignlondon.com/>

<http://www.urbanevents.org/>

References to other reports and workshops

<http://www.urbandesignlondon.com/resources/UDL%20training%202008%20FINAL.pdf>

<http://www.urbandesignlondon.com/training.html>

Project Images

