# Neil Rackham Foundation Award Submission

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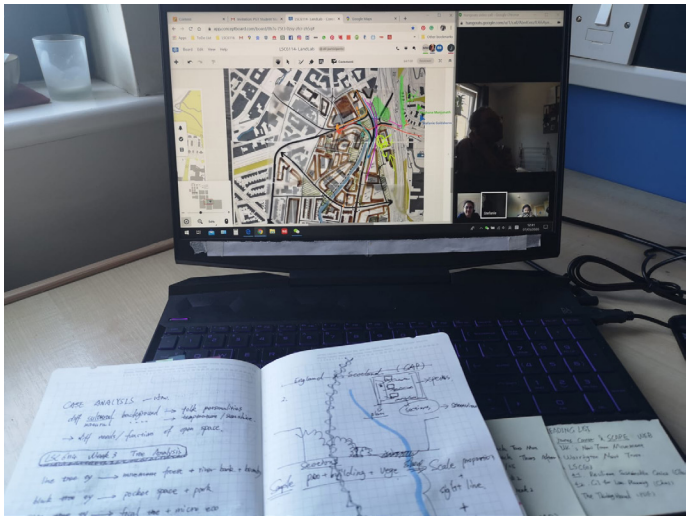
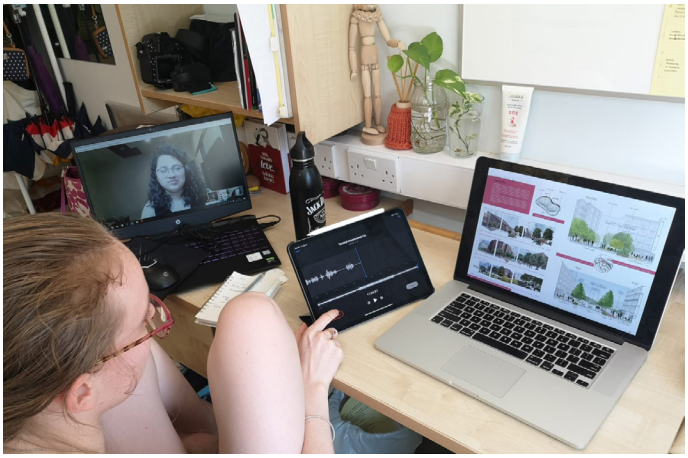


Taking notes in a group discussion, multi-tasking drawings with a web call.

Our group consists of three Post-Graduate Taught students (MA1) in Landscape Architecture. Working in teams is an essential skill in Landscape Architecture; adjusting our process to work remotely allowed us to build self-dependency, encouraged us to trust one another, and find creative solutions to replace things we had previously assumed were necessary.

Our project was a typical format within the discipline; we were given a site, told to analyse the existing condition, given specific attributes to consider, then told to create a proposal to redevelop the area based on our findings. The site was a 0.4 km2 area roughly located between Granville Square and the intersection at Queens Road and Bramall Lane, along the Sheaf River. The brief asked for a master plan proposal for this entire site, and a more specific proposal for the 600m2 area directly around Granville Square.

The most significant issues we came up against while working on this project were inconsistent access to other group members, not having a space within which to work simultaneously, and lacking amenities on which we had come to rely.



Stefanie and Meghana recording an audio presentation via web call.

Working across multiple time zones and with variable availability meant we needed to have consistent ways to contact one another. The module coordinator suggested regular group meetings once a week at the minimum; however, our situation did not always accommodate this. We knew in advance that one of our group members would be repatriated back to India mid-project. Unfortunately, the repatriation process was incredibly disorganized; flights were booked, then cancelled, rescheduled and cancelled again. Once she finally managed to get to India, she was kept in Government quarantine for two weeks, where the internet connection was inconsistent. Working collectively was difficult, to say the least.

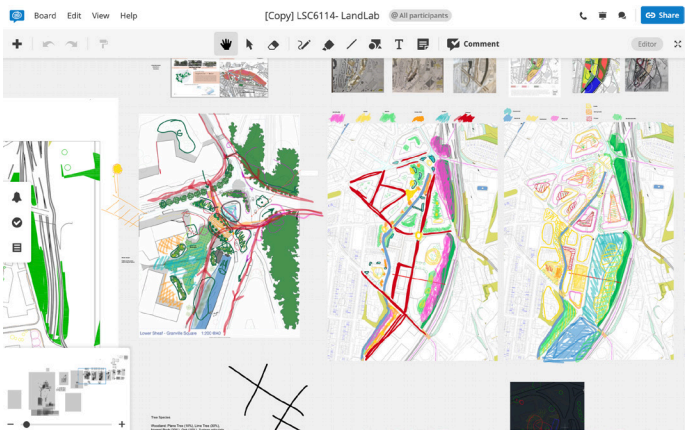
We tackled this by putting systems in place during the first week; we made sure everyone was on the same page and closely followed our plan. These included a shared Google Drive folder to host all work, two WhatsApp groups, one for notes, web links and relevant photos, the other for all discussion, our ConceptBoard account, which is explained further in the next section, and an InDesign template with a predefined colour palette and Paragraph Styles. As for getting together, we had drop-in “when you can” work sessions on Wednesdays. Weekly assignments were discussed at these sessions; major decisions were either saved until everyone was available to talk or when that was not practical, the person who could not be there had to accept the decision of the other two.

One reason we were most successful was that trust was assumed. Once we agreed on one element of the design, for example, that there would be a bike

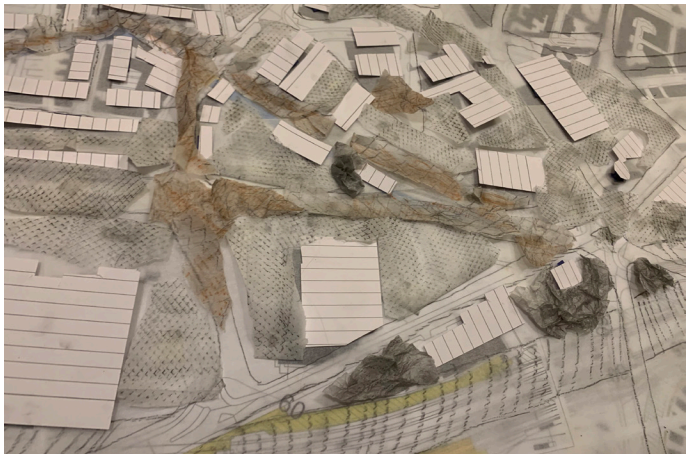
lane down the east side of Queen Street, other people would not change that in their work. Similarly, if we agreed one person was going to decide tree species, we trusted it would get done, and went along with whatever that person suggested until there was time to meet and discuss. This prevented us from wasting time by backtracking or working on the same thing twice, or spending more time than necessary for small decisions. It also encouraged us to let go, so to speak. It can be tempting to resent when work is done differently than how you would have completed it, but when you work in a design practice, all work is collective. Getting precious is neither possible nor healthy. Communicating in advance about ground rules saved us from having conflicting expectations, and we were able to call out anyone not adhering to the rules as agreed. This is something we would recommend to anyone else working in a group, pandemic or not.

Considering a more practical issue, normally design work takes place in a "Practice" or "Studio," an open-concept room with both personal desks and large central tables where practitioners can present to their colleagues, draw collectively, and bounce ideas off of one another. The walls are covered in precedent images, relevant resources, and recent work for future inspiration. Our department has several floors of such rooms within the Arts Tower; unfortunately, this was one of the first buildings to be shut down. Finding a digital alternative to support these functions was critical to our success.

Initially, we attempted to draw analogue, holding drawings up during video calls. This limited our progress as the drawings were difficult to see, other group members were not able to highlight parts to which they were referring when providing criticism, and we were unable to draw alternative iterations



A selection of maps covered in working sketches within ConceptBoard.


Scrap paper analogue model on top of taped A4 base map.

quickly. Luckily we found a free digital platform that was far more suitable, a product called ConceptBoard. Basically, it is a virtual whiteboard, but what drew us to this company specifically was that it is web-client based, which was important since our team is split across Windows and macOS. First, we inserted base maps and pictures that we wanted to discuss. Then, we used the different colours of pens and highlights to draw our concepts on top, as we discussed in a call. Adjustable text boxes were easy to organize into mind maps and annotations, and our instructor's feedback from each week was laid out for everyone to see. We found it as close to a digital studio as one could hope.

Finally, there were some situations where digital work was not suitable to develop our ideas properly. Models and large format drawings are indispensable for ensuring that designs are scaled appropriately for the site. Generally, we would have access to large format plotters to print maps, and the art supply store on the 15th floor would have had professional model making materials. Making do with what was available locally, we printed small sections of each map on A4 pages and taped them together and built models out of household recyclable materials and children's art supplies.

All in all, our successes came down to letting go of preconceived expectations, being adaptable, thinking creatively, and actively communicating even it was not easy.