

MANCHESTER SCHOOL
OF ARCHITECTURE

what if?

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MSA
LIVE 25

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Partners

What If?, located in Edgeley Stockport is an emerging community and demonstrator hub. Nestled in the developing city, bounded by infrastructure, What if? aims to be a catalyst for the production of resilient futures and neighbourhoods. Pauline Johnstone and Aoife Rath-Cullimore have played a pivotal role in communicating What if? and its possibilities, enabling the development of a site specific and engaging design.

Edgeley faces a number of social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, which have been highlighted through Stockport8 and Resilient Cities Network, who have underscored an ambition to take action and create social cohesion. Partners Planit, ShedKm and Grow Edgley have played a role in providing insights into how What if? could re-imagine the common neighbourhood, to shape an innovative collective space.

As an organisation, What If? is rooted in a people-first ethos, embodying a spirit of fun, solidarity, and shared purpose. The project is designed to be a beacon of community engagement; celebrating collaboration, creativity, and the power of collective imagination. To honour and continue the work of its collaborators and partners, the project has preserved their name. This decision reflects a deep commitment to collective ownership and the belief that lasting social change is built through unity and continuity.

What if's core aim is to encourage holistic growth, along with local, resilient cultural hubs, which strengthen community values, well-being and underserved green spaces.

Introduction

what if?

Rest. Fun. Collaboration. Since its establishment What if? has continually aimed to channel a calming and interactive ethos. The organisation has been a space which challenges the confinements connected to everyday life, by providing a refuge and place of rest for the people of Edgeley. This project is centred around developing and constructing a proposal that physically encapsulates the characteristics of What if? which include; joy, rest, cohesion and belonging. The design proposal was driven by the ongoing question how could we continue these characteristics, 'functionally symbolise and place What if? on the map, whilst encouraging resilience? Alongside this the design outputs and visual manifestations are encouraged to be designed 'with Edgeley not to Edgely' (Stockport Council, MSA Live Public engagement session, 2025).

A Beacon

What if?, appears hidden amidst the growing developments in Edgely. The large Hollywood tower encroaches onto the small hub. By creating a wayfinding or a sculptural symbol of What if, and its purposes as a place of fun and rest, aims to provide a sense of belonging for the community. Through the design of a Beacon What if? can challenge the dense surroundings and bring back solitude and solidarity. The team explore the possibilities of an interactive and engaging symbol for What if? and Edgeley.

A Space of rest

Creating a strong sense of place has been central throughout this process. One of the main goals of the collaboration was to reimagine What If's relationship with its landscape and reconnect both the organisation and the wider community to the overlooked, seemingly derelict Hollywood Park. The landscape strategy and beacon were designed to reflect the liminal, in-between nature of the site. Bridging contrasting areas such as the River Mersey and the surrounding green spaces. The team's design re-positions What if? as a vibrant meeting point for diverse cultures and communities, while unlocking the rich recreational potential of a forgotten park.

Diving in

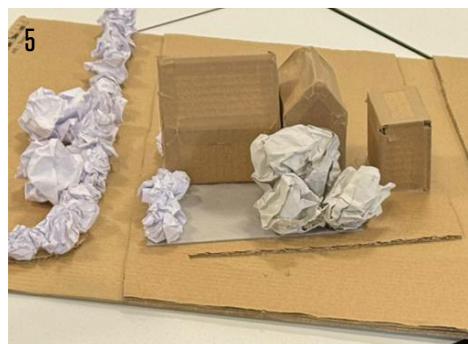
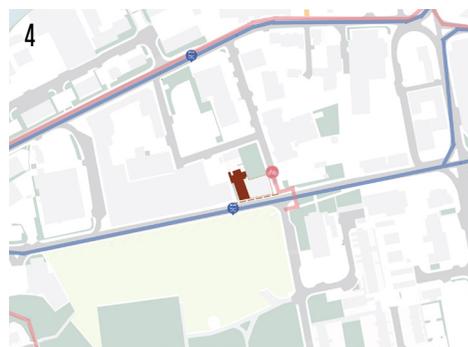
Getting to know our team and the project

Ice Breaker – Getting to know: MSA Live and What if? is a project which centralises interacting with others, team building and placing oneself in a new environment. The experience can be quite daunting but creating a safe and reflective environment through sharing knowledge and skills is pivotal. In our ice breaker we aimed to do this with everyone sharing their 'best' architectural or non-architectural work. This sparked conversations on people's comfort zones and perhaps skills they would like to learn. We touched on the opportunities for the students to learn illustrator, photoshop, procreate, LiDar scanning, Sketchup and much more!

An initial meeting with the collaborator: Aoife, kindly talked through the brief, describing What if's ethos and the relation of space to a community. The meeting highlighted key characteristics of What if?, including playfulness, a people-driven ethos, and imaginative thinking. Through the conversation the team was able to gauge an initial response to the creative drivers within the project, as well as understand what client interaction may look like in the future. This approach not only encouraged deeper engagement with the brief but also enabled the March students to introduce more advanced architectural thinking, such as RIBA Stages and RIBA Outcomes, beyond the typical scope of early years in architecture school. While the What if? outcomes are not directly aligned with RIBA guidelines, there was a conscious effort to consider how these professional frameworks could intersect with the project's concepts.

Initial Desktop studies: In the initial day of MSA Live the students were encouraged to learn, whilst considering a place driven approaches. By inviting them to search and visually explore the context of What if? through illustrator and CAD Mapper workshops, we aimed to help them respond to the site whilst furthering their skillset.

Initial Concept Responses: To build a strong connection between the team and the project. From the outset, initial workshops focused on responding to the key characteristics of What if, including playfulness, a people-driven ethos, and imaginative thinking. This page showcases the team's initial responses to the brief, highlighting the creative drivers and experiential characteristics that reflect the ethos of What if. The task invited students to translate conceptual ideas into playful, visual explorations.



1: A skills session in the CAD Lab at MTC: in this one we were exploring illustrstor maps

2: Our meeting with Aoife on teams, where she explained more about What If? and their mission

3: An initial concept response to thoughts of play and beacons

4: A site analysis map created during the Illustrator skills session

5: A rough 1:200 site model to be used for design development

6: A concept for wayfinding across the town

Exploring *what if?* and Beyond

Collaborating on site and in Edgeley

In the first week the team embarked on a site visit to Edgeley, Stockport which was a key step in deepening the understanding of the *What if?* community initiative. The visit provided the opportunity to investigate place-based solutions and spatial relationships between neighbouring structures and voices.

Walking Tour: The site visit began with a walking tour around Edgeley to allow the team to develop a tangible sense of the areas character, existing infrastructure and proposed ideas for the new housing development by ShedKm. Observing the physical space gave insights into accessibility and the lived environment of the local community.

Public Engagement Activity: Following the walk, we participated in a public engagement session. This was a powerful in encouraging reflection and learning, as it brought us closer to the voices and experiences of local residents, stakeholders, and community representatives. The discussions highlighted the range of perspectives and key creative drivers, including local growing, material reuse, and "fun'ctionality". The conversations highlighted the importance of co-creation and collaboration.

The experience underscored the centrality of relationships: between space and people, between institutions and communities, and between expectations and reality. The site visit was a reflective pause, a chance to rethink our initial ideas, and reconnect with the community dimension of our

GETTING TO MEET THE CLIENTS AND OTHER MEMBERS OF STOCKPORT'S COMMUNITY WAS EXTREMELY HELPFUL IN UNDERSTANDING THE WHAT IF? SITE AND CREATING INITIAL DESIGN IDEAS FOR OUR PROJECT. IN ADDITION, IT WAS WONDERFUL TO EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH A REAL CLIENT FOR THE FIRST TIME AND PROVIDED A PLEASANT INSIGHT INTO WHAT AN ARCHITECTURE CAREER ENTAILS.

A quote from one of our BA students

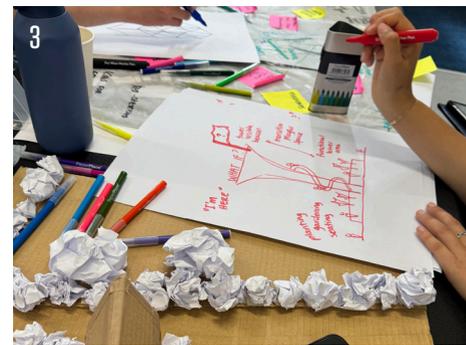
1: Our team at *What If?*'s Demonstrator Hub with collaborator Pauline.

2: Mid-engagement activity

3: Sketching as we discussed

4: Looking out across Hollywood Park

5: Understanding the site more through LIDAR scanning



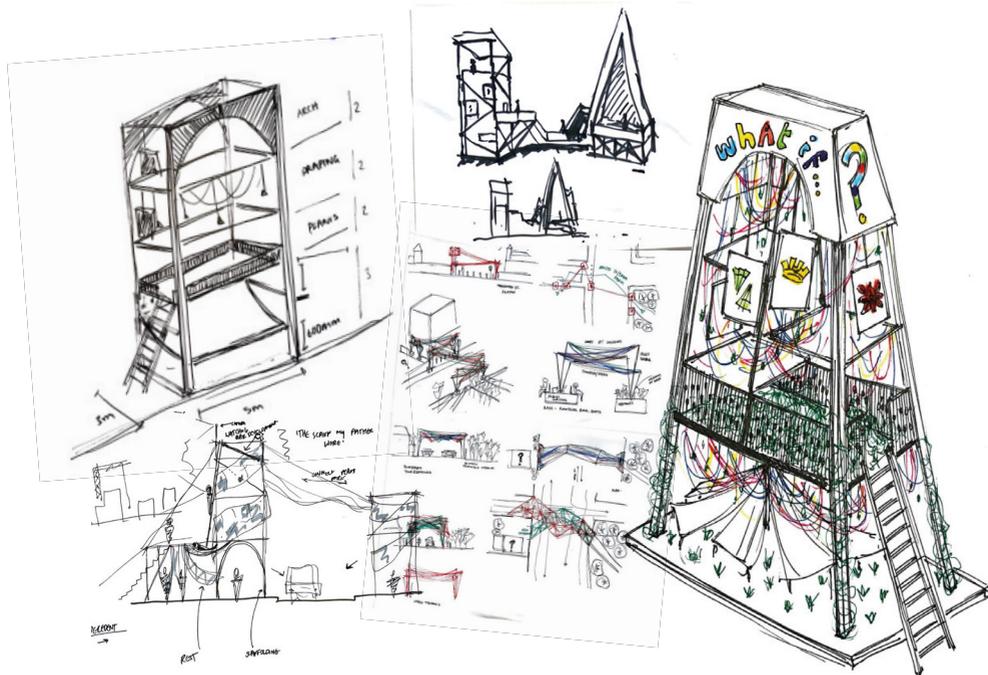
Developing a beacon

Inspired by our conversations with collaborators about everything Edgeley

What if's challenges of being hidden within Stockport's infrastructure sparked insightful conversations about resilience, which translate into beacons that not only locate What If? on the map but also act as symbols of hope and future guidance for the local community.

These beacons could take the form of tall wayfinders. Which are multi-purpose structures that offer seating, greenery through planting strategies, and moments of reflection. Designed using local and recycled materials such as textiles and clothing, would root the project in Stockport's identity, fostering a sense of belonging.

The iterating process could go on forever! Creative and realistic design often takes many moments or questioning to ensure that all objectives surrounding community, rest and fun were met. Constant consideration lengthens the design process which at time can tedious but the ambitions of what if? kept it enjoyable.

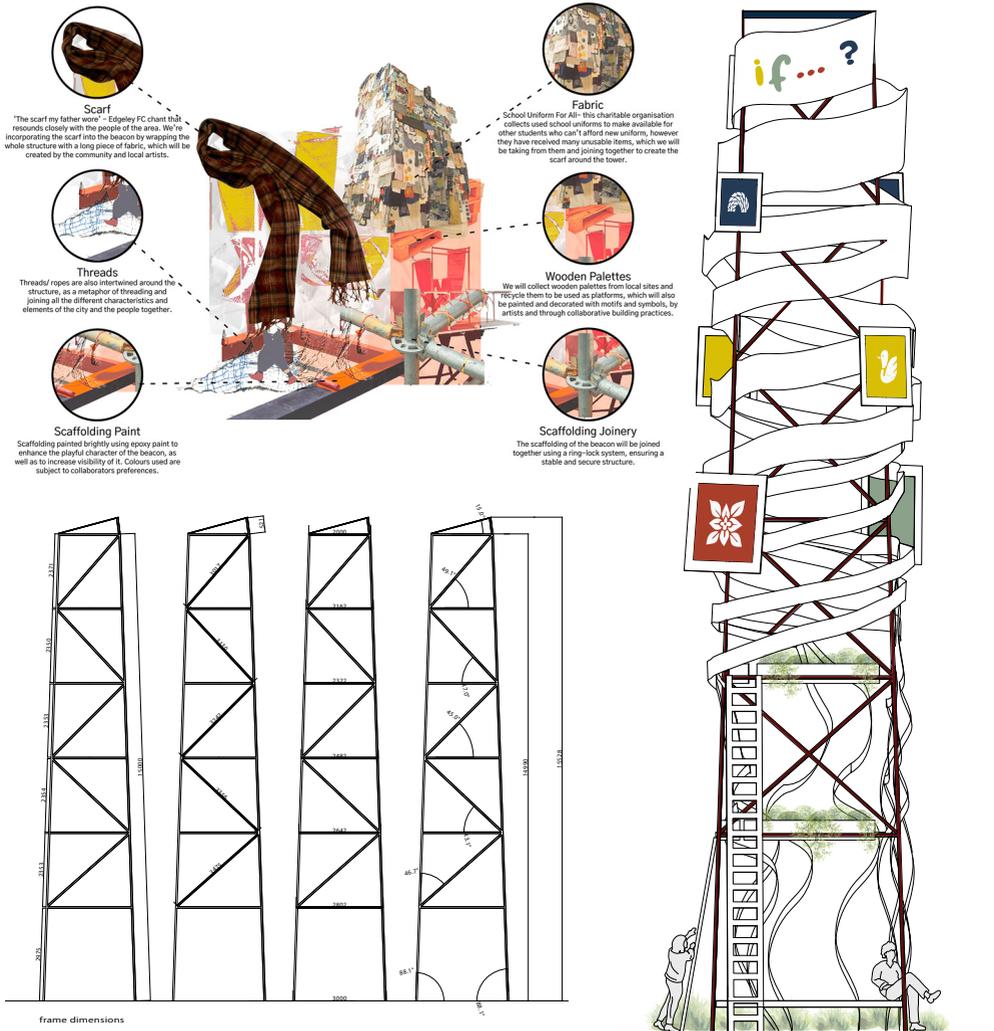


Our Proposal



Delivering a feasible proposal

It was important that what we delivered to What If? was feasible and realistic, within the constraints of cost, size and sustainability. For example, it couldn't be cheap to build but expensive to run. Engaging with the collaborator allowed us to set these constraints and find creative ways to overcome them. Below are some of the finalised diagrams delivered to our collaborator, exploring the potential materiality, as well as scale drawings for construction. These represent a proposal that fit within the expectations for a resilient intervention outlined by What If?.



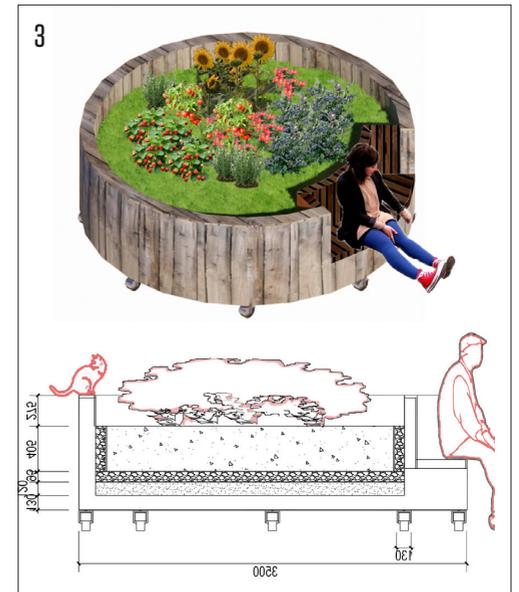
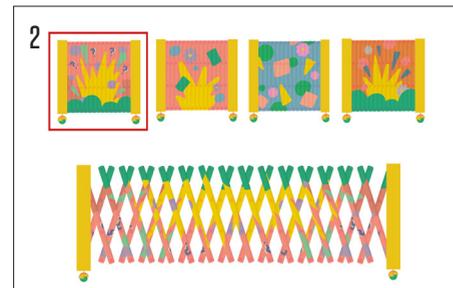
Beyond the beacon

An improved outdoor space at *what if?*

A small team was set up to activate the car parking space in front of the What If? site. A key challenge for the space was that the client wanted to retain two car parking spaces, while there was also an emphasis on using the area as a play space for children.

- 1: New plans for the existing car park space to be turned into a flexible growing and play area.
- 2: A new flexible gate saves space on the site and controls flows of people and cars.
- 3: Concepts for moving planters.

To help reduce the risks for children using the space around vehicles, two scissor fences were designed as a cost-effective solution to control incoming cars to the site. To introduce a sense of play, a mural was designed on the ground to act as a 'functional' road, curving around bespoke planters for children to ride their bikes and scooters on. Extensive research was carried out on the types of plants that could be placed in these planters. Additional signage around the site was also developed.



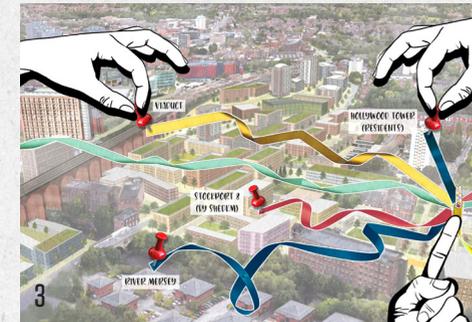
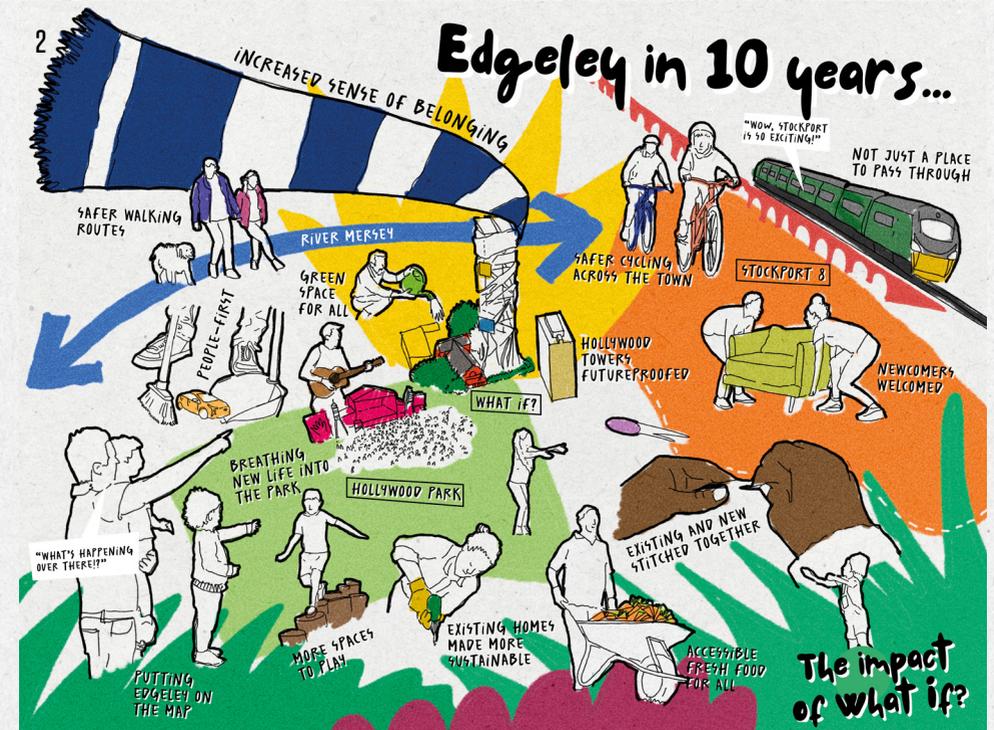
Designing a resilient space

WE NEED TO CREATE ROOM FOR RADICAL REST – WHETHER THAT'S PLAY, GARDENING, MAKING, WATCHING, READING, EATING OR JUST PRESSURE FREE TIME IN A SAFE HAVEN, BUILT IN OUR COMMUNITIES TO CREATE THE CONDITIONS TO BUILD PEOPLE'S SOCIAL RESILIENCE.

A quote from Pauline of What If? on building social resilience

A radical future for what if? & Edgeley

What if? Is driven by belonging, a feeling tied to both future and present experiences. Therefore, a key aim of this project is allowing the proposal to stand beyond the changes of time and provide a rest space with ever changing environments. The idea of resilience was approached through flexibility, adaptability and sustainability. The re-imagining of What if? focuses on being driven by local sourced materials, food and planting, along with elements which can be regularly maintained and adapted through the skills of local people. As a result, the future is driven by social cohesion and is centred on the place and the individuals that call it home.



1: Concept visualisation of What If's car park, incorporating our designs for a better garden space.

2: Masterplan sketch showing the impact of What If? across Edgley

3: The threads of Edgley and Stockport converging at What If?

4: Showing the impact of What If? across neighbouring Hollywood Park

Reflection

Throughout the MSA Live process there have been constant moments of reflection, that have both impacted our current and future design approaches.

Understanding the Client: One of the key challenges we faced was understanding the client's vision. The brief was broad, and the collaborators' excitement were reflected into their ambitious ideas, which in some cases felt overwhelming and difficult to extract what they really wanted. However, we found that constantly communicating with the client and scheduling meetings to discuss the questions assisted in creating a better understanding of their needs.

Expectations and Responses: In both the client and BA students there was a common theme of expectation and how one may respond or challenge the expectations. With the clients it was important to communicate realistic outputs, managing their expectations. For example, we could create an action plan and delegate task, but the achievement of the task heavily depends on the individual's response. Additionally, expectations across team members were limited to those participated. Akeefah, Alex and Max delegated all of the tasks. Akeefah lead wider masterplanning team and outputs as well as constructing the publication. Meanwhile Alex worked on guiding the beacon team, doing the project visuals and social media. Max focused on posting the blogs and leading the immediate site strategy for the beyond the beacon. It was evident that key members of the team take on more responsibilities than others through engagement.

Action Plan: Overall, the action plan we had devised was successful and well-paced. We encountered slight issues when we had to make last minute changes due to issues outside of our control, however this did not impact our final ambition.

Reverse Peer Mentoring: Whilst we were teaching the BA students, we were often learning from them. Skill sets are always varied, and we were shown existing new software and techniques for architectural drawing and presentation. We also learnt a lot from having to guide and organise the students, including how to engage them.



Action Week Recap

Week 1:

- Monday: Getting to know the team, the commissioner and the brief.
- Tuesday: Site survey and site visitation.
- Wednesday: Exploring 'What if and Edgeley - Public Engagement Activity'.
- Thursday: Sketching initial concepts of the beacon.
- Friday: Physical exploration and design development.

Week 2:

- Monday: Revising the design: Finalisation of the beacon and site.
- Tuesday: Sketches of the new strategies and cultural considerations.
- Wednesday: Presenting the final ideas to the client.
- Thursday: Detailing the design responding to client.
- Friday: Reflecting on MSA Live and what is?

The second week expanded on the team's communication skills, however unlike Week 1 instead of learning new software skills the students were encouraged to further their current skills. It allowed them to comfortably approach the resolving stages of a project. Where they could focus on providing the clients outputs, with more ease and comfort.

Upon reflection we found that the first week, was very explorative. It took a more creative approach where students were developing skills through software workshops and engagement activities. It enhanced their people skills and architectural experiences, whilst still being and enjoyable week.

ABOUT

Each year the MSA LIVE programme unites Masters Architecture year 1 and Masters of Architecture & Adaptive Resuse students with those in BA year 1 and year 2 and Masters Landscape Architecture 1 in mixed-year teams to undertake live projects with external partners to create social impact.

LIVE PROJECTS

All MSA LIVE projects are live. A live project is where an educational organisation and an external partner develop a brief, timescale, and outcome for their mutual benefit.

SOCIAL IMPACT

All MSA LIVE projects are for community benefit or have social impact. Social impact is the effect an organization's actions have on the well-being of a community. Our agendas are set by our external collaborators.

EXTERNAL PARTNERS

MSA LIVE projects work with many organisations: charities, community groups, social enterprises, community interest companies, researchers, practitioners and educators.

STUDENT-LED

Our MSA masters students take the lead in the project conception, brief development, delivery and co-ordination of a small project. Other cohorts joined for an eventful 2 weeks of activities at the end of the academic year.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

Working in teams within and across year groups and courses; MSA students participate in peer to peer learning. In addition, collaborators, participants and students engage in the transfer of tangible and intellectual property, expertise, learning and skills.

LARGE SCALE

This year approximately 650 students from 5 cohorts in MSA have worked on 40 projects with partners.

QUESTIONS

For questions about MSA LIVE please contact the MSA LIVE team:

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BLOG

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