Introduction
Birmingham School of Architecture have partnered with Network Rail since 2012 to improve the quality of teaching on construction related safety to undergraduate students. Through the partnering arrangement the students have access to the construction site at Birmingham New Street station via tours lead by staff from the project team. The Network Rail health and safety manager, Darren Cobb, leads two formal teaching sessions each year to examine the designer’s role in construction safety.

Benefits of Partnering
Partnering with a client organisation, such as Network Rail, has a number of benefits for a school of architecture.

1. The opportunity for students to visit a live construction site is very important in providing a real life context for the classroom based teaching. Understanding site operations is difficult without first hand experience, so access to a 'live laboratory' is invaluable. Site visits also bring students into contact with the wide range of construction professionals involved in delivering significant projects.

2. The specialist knowledge brought by Network Rail's in-house health and safety manager is a huge bonus. Darren Cobb’s well informed input is driven by a desire to improve the skills of young architecture graduates. This improvement in skills is intended to move graduates towards the position of advocates for best practice in designing for safety, not just reactive members of the project team.

Partnering with a school of architecture has also brought benefits for Network Rail, including building knowledge networks and demonstrating their commitment to educating the next generation of construction professionals.
Lessons Learnt

A number of lessons have been learnt in the first two years of the partnership.

1. Undergraduate and postgraduate students have different needs: The Birmingham School of Architecture/Network Rail partnership focuses on undergraduate students who respond best to a clear timetable for engagement; Postgraduate students respond well to a greater degree of freedom, arranging meetings with mentors as frequently as both parties agree.

2. Students should be encouraged to reflect on what they see on site: Early experiences of construction sites can be disorientating, with many processes and components clearly visible for the first time; A site diary can be used to record activity on site and prompt reflection.

3. Demonstrate the principles of construction safety using case studies: Real life examples of good and bad practice are an effective way to link client expertise to student learning; Capturing these case studies through drawings, photographs and project records is an ongoing opportunity.

Partnering Network

Our key reflection on the partnership between Birmingham School of Architecture and Network Rail is how lucky we are that it is happening at all. The initial idea was prompted by a chance conversation in a social setting. This is an opportunistic partnership, embraced by both parties, but if the notion of partnering for construction safety education is to have real impact a more structured approach is required. A nationwide network that identifies willing partners and facilitates the link to schools of architecture would provide a significant step forward.

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Darren Cobb is Head of Safety and Sustainable Development (HS2) at Network Rail. Darren has many years experience as a health and safety professional within the construction industry. He has worked for Network Rail since 2008 and previously worked for Pettifer Group, PCM Consulting and Shaylor Group plc. Darren currently leads on safety and sustainability within the HS2 team at Network Rail.