



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## Exploring the significance of local mixed streets

Martire, A. (2019). Exploring the significance of local mixed streets. *Urban Design Journal*, 150, 10-11.

**Published in:**  
Urban Design Journal

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

**Publisher rights**

© 2019 Urban Design Journal.

This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

## **The StreetSpace project. Exploring the significance of local mixed streets**

Agustina Martire

Local mixed streets have been part of the urban fabric as long as cities have existed. They contain retail, services, production, leisure and residential uses. They host a series of different cultures, activities and identities. Despite the car and retail led redevelopment of the last half century, they are still a significant part of urban everyday life across the world. However, even though they are valuable spaces, many of these streets have succumbed to generic and commercial urban regeneration. Some have been built upon, others privatised, and more generally their local, organic, gradual and piecemeal condition has been replaced by large franchised development, less diverse and less local. This paper intends to illustrate how the StreetSpace project aims to enhance and deepen the understanding of local mixed streets through an engaged practice of analysis and design.

Sociologists, historians and geographers have closely studied the histories and memories, behaviour of people and gentrification processes of local mixed streets, Sharon Zukin and Phil Hubbard specially highlighting the value of their everyday and mundane qualities. Urban designers, planners and architects study their form, space, movement and potential, but not always consider the perceptions and experiences of people. Matthew Carmona, Suzi Hall and Laura Vaughan have developed very interesting local case studies on mixed streets, opening the door to their deeper and cross-disciplinary understanding, but these approaches are yet to significantly influence the world of practice of architecture and planning. Therefore, the StreetSpace project, based at Queen's University Belfast, intends to bridge the gap between disciplines of the built environment, humanities and social sciences, engaging the public, practice and policy, by enquiring on issues such as physical fabric and mobility, but also experience, perceptions and aspirations that reflect realities of a wide diversity of issues of local mixed streets. These approaches also refer to class, age, gender, culture and heritage, many times overlooked in built environment disciplines. The project aims to highlight the value of those still existing local mixed streets and challenge large scale placeless urban regeneration.

The project started in 2011 with a simple exercise, where first year architecture students drew the sections of different streets in Belfast. The exercise was also carried out in Buenos Aires, Edinburgh and Kilkenny, providing a very precise comparison of the physical conditions of streets in those cities (figure 1). What became evident from these explorations was that behind the drawing of the street section, a much wider set of conditions was revealed. Discussions about space, dwelling and atmosphere were raised, but also conversations about class, accessibility, traffic, ritual, experience and memories were part of the many different aspects brought up by the students. These discussions made it clear that architecture and design were not readily responding to many of these issues.

*Figure 1 - Kilkenny Parliament Street - Flavin and Harford - WIT 2013*

As a response to this, the StreetSpace project now organises a series of multidisciplinary workshops and a yearlong design studio, that explore ways of understanding local mixed streets, by tapping into different disciplines in academia, while also including the participation of practitioners, civil servants, NGOs and students. The aim of the workshops and studio is to produce representations that give a broader and deeper understanding of local mixed streets. We look for ways to analyse and

understand the way the urban form of local mixed streets relates to how they are experienced. So far, the project has studied 3 streets in Belfast and one street in Naples, one in London and one in Ljubljana.

The first two workshops studied North Street and Castle Street, two of the most culturally and architecturally rich streets in Belfast City Centre, currently under threat of demolition and redevelopment. The workshop brought together scholars and practitioners from architecture, planning, anthropology, sociology, history, geography art and sound. The results of the workshop were 4 maps that told different stories about the streets: aspirations, histories, sound and (figure 2) and perceptions. The maps produced for proved to have an impact on the members of Belfast City Council and the Department for Communities, who subsequently became partners and funders of the project.

*Figure 2-Sound map- North Street Belfast 2015*

The findings of the workshop were more deeply analysed by the yearlong architectural design studios. North Street and Castle Street reflect the gradual and incremental transformation of built environment and uses through time. The bombs of the 1941 Blitz and the 'Troubles' did not cause large physical damage to these streets. The largest transformation of the urban fabric was instead due to planning decisions of transport and housing in the 80s and 90s, and later commercial urban redevelopment.

*Figure 3-North street in 1969-2017 – maps by author based on OS maps*

In this context, the western part of Castle Street along with a large part of terraced housing was cleared for roads and parking space, while North Street (figure 3) suffered major demolition in the 2000's and 2010's. These two streets, together with Donegall street, are the only ones that still support local trade in Belfast City Centre (figure 4).

*Figure 4- Ground floor use in Belfast City Centre - Conall Casey and Jack Knights*

Despite existing in a similar urban landscape, each street has transformed differently in the last four decades. Castle Street has sustained its activities and vitality, with a constant community, for more than two centuries, yet it lacks buildings of great historic or architectural significance (figure 5).

*Figure 5-Castle Street 2016 - Eddie McKewon*

Meanwhile North Street, still holding a good number of very high quality 19th and early 20th century architecture, has lost most of the community of traders and visitors it had in the past (figure 6).

*Figure 6-North Street 2015- Brian Maguire*

A series of buildings were demolished in 2015/16 on North Street Upper, to give way to a new flagship building for enhancing tourism in Belfast City Centre, this is still in preparation and there are no hints of its actual planning or physical qualities. In North Street Lower the threat of demolition is still imminent but not yet approved by planning. The top floors of most of these buildings have been empty for decades, under ownership of a series of subsequent large developers, who do not maintain the buildings and do not encourage their use. However, between 2014 and 2018, a selection of retail units was reopened, whose products are mapped in figure 7.

*Figure 7- Products sold on North Street - Milda Paceviciute*

Interviews to local traders have revealed that even though the street seems derelict and in need of repair, there was a vibrant local community, that at least for a series of years thrived and supported an ecosystem of local artists, office workers and local traders. This community still exists in the background and is in grave need of spaces to inhabit, work and perform. In 2018 most of these shops were closed and their traders evicted, with the only surviving businesses in December 2018 being a barber, an independent second hand bookshop and a fish and chips shop.

In Naples, London and Ljubljana the two day workshops revealed a series of hidden realities of the streets studied. These workshops were all people oriented, including a large number of methods for participant observation that revealed a complex reality of the streets studied. In London Kingsland High Street the local market was studied and taxonomies of products were contrasted with the experience of three very different public spaces in the depth of the street (Figure 8).

*Figure 8-London Kingsland Road Market-2017*

In Naples, Corso Garibaldi, the ethnic diversification was mapped through the spilling of sales of products to the public space of the street, and the height of buildings justified the density of population using the street on a daily basis.

*Figure 9- Naples Corso Garibaldi - Ben Stevenson*

In Ljubljana the history of the everyday life of Poljanska Cesta was evident through the stories and narratives of traders and dwellers in a street that would be very difficult to define in simple or branded terms that other parts of the city have achieved for enhancing tourism.

Finally, in the more recent StreetSpace design studio, we are studying the personal stories of those who live, work and pass through the corridor of Donegall Street, Clifton Street and Crumlin Road. This time, an ethnographer trained us in the difficult task of talking to people and how letting people tell their stories of a place actually reveals very deep realities, memories and experiences. The challenge was to turn those stories into drawings, which was most successfully achieved by the drawing of the North Street Arcade, a building that which caught fire in 2004 and has been abandoned ever since.

*Figure 10-North Street Arcade in 2004 - Aisling Madden*

The StreetSpace project is an exploration, it does not intend to solve the problems of local mixed streets, but aims to highlight their value by exposing hidden stories and realities many times ignored in their redevelopment. We hope to continue the project by focusing on the relationship between urban form and ethnography as ways to highlight the value and significance of local mixed streets.

*Figure 11 – Walkers on Writers Square – Eline Combes*