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StreetSpace Studio – architecture learns anthropology

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The StreetSpace project was devised to encourage architecture students to have a better understanding of the value of mixed streets. The project has evolved into an interdisciplinary and international venture that explores mixed streets and involves academics, students, practitioners and civil servants. The StreetSpace studio acts as a catalyst and testing ground for new approaches to the analysis of mixed streets. Local mixed streets are complex, valuable and dynamic places. They were conceived gradually, and are lived and perceived in a great variety of ways by a broad variety of people. They have a mix of uses, activities, building types and sizes, and a series of shared identities and memories. Even though this complexity has been addressed by scholars in geography, planning and urban design (Hubbard 2017, Carmona 2015, Vaughan 2015, Griffiths et al. 2008, Gehl 2008, Appleyard 1977) the overlap between anthropology and architecture of mixed streets has been largely neglected. Therefore this project explores ways of understanding these streets through drawing to reveal their mundane and everyday qualities.

It may be no surprise to anthropologists that most architects’ understanding of a sense of place is rather limited compared to other disciplines who study the built environment. Architects tend to naturally focus on the physical characteristics of a place and there are many methods and techniques that are well tested and used in schools of architecture in something called ‘site analysis’. This normally includes scale drawings in plan and section of immediately adjacent areas to an assigned site, and in better cases includes studies of sunlight, climate, materials, wider built environment and historic structures. This limited approach tends to avoid any discussion of the complexity of the types of people that inhabit an existing space or a new one to be designed. Moreover, it avoids any economic, social or political discussion of what defines a place. This limited approach leads to generic design proposals, with briefs that do not fully respond to the needs of a place and its people. These shortcomings in architectural education have been explored by Salama (2007), Till (2009), Teymur (2007), Salingaros (2008) and Glendinning (2010) among others, and they all agree that something needs to be done in architectural education to overcome such approaches. However, despite the limited nature of generic architectural site analysis, architects’ ability to represent ideas and spaces into two dimensional surfaces is very developed and rather unique. This opens up the possibility of new interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of a place by architects and architecture students.

The StreetSpace project

The StreetSpace project started in 2011 with a simple task for first year architecture students: each pair of students had to pick a street in Belfast and draw a plan and a section of the street. Initially the aims of this exercise were twofold, on the one hand it encouraged students to think about spaces in section, rather than plan, which revealed the spaces of the streets, those of the buildings and the thresholds that link them; and on the other hand it opened up a new series of questions about the people that inhabit those spaces. The exercise was then carried out as a workshop in different schools of architecture (Edinburgh, Buenos Aires, Kilkenny), and systematically the discussions about the drawings went well beyond the physical qualities of those spaces and touched on problems of scale, space and materials, but more importantly it brought up more complex and diverse discussions about class, gender, politics, economy and ethnicity. The topics of discussion revealed that as architects, we were out of our depth in other fields of expertise. This meant that the best thing to do would be to benefit from the approaches of disciplines that understood and mapped the behaviour, aspirations, perceptions and experiences of people. The first interdisciplinary
workshop was set in August 2015 to analyse North Street in Belfast City Centre. North Street has a significant nineteenth and twentieth century built fabric, but many of its top floors are in disuse and vacant, and is currently threatened by large-scale development. In 2015 the shops still catered for a broad diversity of uses, from bookshops to grocery stores and from galleries to tattoo shops. Many of these buildings have by now been demolished and many of the local shops been displaced. The workshop attracted a series of scholars, practitioners and civil servants who very simply applied their knowledge to the site by making maps about the urban design, historic geography, sound and people’s stories of the place. Each one of these groups revealed many layers of the street, which, once drawn in the maps, allowed other people to understand the value of North Street. However, the approach of a single workshop of 2 days was not deep enough to reveal a range of characteristics of the street. That is why that autumn we led a Masters in architecture studio, which further focused on North Street. The history of the street was further analysed, the precise changes in the fabric through the last 100 years, the land dedicated to car parks, the vacancy of the top floors, the depth of beauty of some of those derelict buildings and most remarkably, how the products sold on the street defined much of its current reality. The idea of superdiversity inspired by Suzi Hall (architect and anthropologist) and investigated by one of the students in the studio, opened up an innovative way of representing the space of mixed streets.
This instance of the project led to a series of architectural interventions that challenged the current large scale, franchised retail led development proposals and replaced them with a series of smaller, piecemeal, responsive buildings including adaptive reuse of historic buildings and new infill buildings.

Between 2015 and 2018 a series of workshops and architecture studios continued investigating the complexities of mixed streets in Belfast, Glasgow, London and Naples, with a similar approach, but a more refined set of categories to investigate. The latest studio and workshop looked at streets through the lenses of history, arts and culture, housing, retail, public space and mobility. Even though this study revealed under-researched aspects of Belfast mixed streets, where the value of the local and historic fabric was highlighted, the main absence recognized were the stories of people. Individual stories that define the histories and memories of a place and the rich qualities of everyday life were left behind maps of use, green areas, built fabric and heritage.

**StreetSpace Studio 2018-19**

As a result of the lessons learned from previous studios and workshops, the studio and workshop of 2018-19 would be focused on the experiences of people in place. Ethnography appeared as a very suitable method for investigating this aspect of mixed streets. The organization of the studios in the Masters of Architecture at Queen’s into distinct units, allowed the rare opportunity of carrying out one full semester of research on one of the most complex streets in Belfast, the corridor made by Donegall Street, Clifton Street and Crumlin Road. Sixteen students spent 8 weeks investigating the lives and memories of local residents, traders and workers. The studio began with an explanation of the objectives and a walkabout on site. Most importantly, this investigation could not be done and taught by only architects, so the teaching team was enriched by one anthropologist/ethnographer (Kayla Rush) and one doctoral student (Anna Skoura) who investigates graphic ethnography methods in her PhD. This allowed the students to learn a series of unusual skills for architects such as unstructured interviews and simply the skill of talking to people.

By reading texts of Kuschnir 2016, Lucas 2009, Ramos and Azevedo 2016, the students became acquainted with a new set of approaches to drawing and ethnography that were previously foreign to them, and largely ignored in the discipline of architecture. The use of drawing skills beyond architecture was a challenge that students took on surprisingly well. In terms of interviewing skills, the opportunity opened up for students to gain a real insight in the experiences and memories of individuals. This was carried out assuming that you do not need to ask direct questions to people about a place, such as ‘do you like this street?’ but instead have a relaxed conversation about their own histories of a place. The students later turned those conversations into very complex drawings that informed the research and later an architectural intervention in the street.

The purpose of the project was to reveal the hidden stories of an area that could disappear completely if the current development plans get planning approval. One of the best examples of this challenge was the work by Aisling Madden. She spent a significant amount of time with four people of the arts community in Belfast, who used to work in the North Street Arcade. The arcade was built in the 1930s and had its heyday until the late 1960s, when the area was affected by the changes in retail structure and culture caused by the Troubles. A bomb exploded in the building in 1971, and even though it was still in use, the arcade declined. Eventually the building had a resurge in the early 2000s, when the arts community shared the space with small retailers. By 2004 the arcade was practically fully occupied. This is very cleverly depicted in the poster created by Aisling.
The drawing shows in detail the use and occupation of each of the units in the building. Not only showing use, but telling a story through the combination of all those people that inhabited the building.

 Writers Square is a public space owned by the Department of Communities that was built in the 1990s after the demolition of a series of blocks in front of St Anne’s square. The square’s design is flawed; it has few ill defined areas for sitting and playing, the excessive change of levels makes it uncomfortable, and the difficulty of access and lack of permeability provide an uninviting space. However, despite the fact that it is a rather unlived space, there are some people using it. Eline Combes mapped this use by drawing the clothes of people, so she could identify their gender, age and background.
The diversity of these clothes showed a broader picture of the users and uses of the space, the way they interact with each other and the way their bodies occupy the space. This revealed patterns that would have been difficult to identify in a single visit to the square or a set of short interviews.

Clifton House, the oldest institutional building in Belfast, houses one of the oldest archives in the city. The building worked as the poor house in the 18th and 19th centuries, a hospital later on, and now houses accommodation for people with dementia. The building survived the Belfast Blitz in 1941, the Troubles and 1970s road building that transformed the city. Aaron Duffy chose a collage to show this building through history, painting red those events that passed and in green the elements that still survive.

![Figure 3 - Aaron Duffy - Clifton House](image)

This makes for a compelling image that shows different layers of history while remaining faithful to the current spatial qualities of the site. This together with a timeline, show the history not only of the site but of a series of objects now present in the Clifton House museum, each with a rich past that taps on the memory of local residents.

Adam Moore studied the prison and the hospital; he shadowed a nurse and spent significant time with ex patients and staff of the prison. This led to an evocative and provocative series of collages with excerpts of the interviews. The images speak for themselves.
You lied to me. 
You can lie to me. 
But you will not try me. 
You must not try me with anger in your heart. 
Forgiveness is not in my office.

"I was walking late at night and walking to the cut in the dark, you have to walk up beside the prison wall to get to the car park."
"I've heard that they buried prisoners in unmarked graves up against the prison wall."
"They used to nail the execution notice to the prison door for the public to view."

"I can see the prison from my room, it is early in the morning."
"I can see the trees swaying around but they do not speak to any of us."
"It looks as though the prisoners can see it through my window - I have to keep the blinds closed."

Wedding day in prison.
Each of the images reveals the memory of a person’s experiences of those spaces, evoking feelings and situations that would be impossible to conceive without having had that immersive experience of ethnographic research.

The flexibility of Victorian buildings is evident in the building on Donegall Street studied by Eve Turkington.

The building, finished in 1839, housed a series of different offices throughout almost two centuries. The age of the building and its history is embedded in the current real estate business of the participant Eve had a series of conversations with. The sense of ownership of the place was revealed in the interviews and showed the importance of a solid ageless building on this particular street.

The complexities of the celebrations in the Indian Community Centre were investigated by Lea Vandekerckhove. The symbols and ideas of this community centre clash with the original building, which is part of Carlisle Memorial Church, designed in the Gothic Revival style by renowned architect W.H. Lynn in 1875. This clash of styles does not impact the vibrancy of the building, enlivened by these events that happen regularly, bringing an outsider community into the heart of Belfast, and making of this city their home.
Besides the drawings, the students engaged in a creative ethnography workshop, led by Kayla Rush. Students were encouraged to use their ethnographic research to produce a poem and a prose piece during one day. The pieces were compelling and evocative.

Shane Carville interviewed a woman who worked for the Courthouse on Crumlin Road. The Courthouse was designed by Charles Lanyon and built in 1850. The building was in use until 1998 and suffered significant damage from a fire in 2007. Since then it has been derelict, but was recently purchased by Signature Living to turn into a hotel. This is Shane’s poem:

No thoughts on the future
Straight in from school
Unaware of the world
What makes it so cruel
Roof falling down
Hoarding on fences,
Peach / orange walls
Graffitti on benches.
Murderers and terrorists
The most horrific of cases,
Knowing people by only by nicknames
Fear of recognising faces.
Protected from the outside
Together they stand,
Through underground tunnels they go,
Officers parties, with a band?
Despite all the horror
The ugly peach/orange and blue,
No regrets. It must live on.
A hotel will do.

The poem is very effective in revealing an individual story of the courthouse worker, but it also speaks about a moment in the history of Belfast, something that resonates in the memories and imagination of those who lived and did not live the effects of the Troubles.

**Conclusion**

Architecture is a diverse and contested discipline; it traditionally borrows ideas and concepts from many other fields and appropriates them. The StreetSpace project is not proposing a completely new approach, but one that takes advantage of the skills learned within architecture and combines them with others in anthropology and ethnography to make students aware of the complexity of the experiences of people in place, in this case a mixed street in a complex urban environment. The drawings made by the students are neither improvised nor rushed; they respond to weeks of detailed understanding of specific people and their own stories of the street. This type of approach enriches the analysis of the place and gives value to the individual experiences of people, which are diverse and sometimes even contradictory.

The StreetSpace project is work in progress, so drawing conclusions would be premature. The project draws on the knowledge and skills of both architecture and anthropology to expand the way architecture students understand place and define a brief to deal with the needs of that place. We hope that this approach will eventually open up broader ways of doing site analysis in schools of architecture and also open up the field of drawing to anthropologists interested in graphic ethnography and anthropology.

**Bibliography**


