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Flood, N. (2019). Public CoLab 2018: Enlivening the riverfront in Derry-Londonderry. *Architecture Ireland*, (308).

Published in:
Architecture Ireland

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

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

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Public CoLab 2018 – Enlivening the Riverfront in Derry-Londonderry

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Public CoLab is a collaborative research laboratory at Queen's University Belfast¹. It leverages architectural design research and harnesses the creativity and skills of architecture students to explore the spatial implications of complex issues of public concern in Northern Ireland. Public CoLab is a live project, a well-known architectural pedagogical approach where students work with “real world” projects, users and clients. This approach was developed in reaction to traditional modes of architectural education, where students operate from within the limits of the architectural design studio developing responses to speculative projects and hypothetical briefs. The intention of live projects is to allow students to be immersed in a design situation that resembles professional practice more closely.^{2,3,4}

In 2018, Public CoLab partnered with Our Future Foyle, a riverfront regeneration initiative that aims to tackle the negative connotations associated with the River Foyle, in Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The traumatic history that haunts this city, high unemployment rates and limited economic investment have contributed to high levels of poor mental health amongst the city's population. The River Foyle is a symbolic and physical reminder of this issue, being repeatedly linked with death by suicide. Our Future Foyle, being a design driven initiative, do not claim to be able to solve this complex question directly. Rather, they use art, design, technology and cultural programming to raise awareness of it and to address the fact that the riverfront is underutilized and undervalued.^{5,6} With these goals in mind, they commissioned Public CoLab to design a series of temporary installations that would enliven the banks of the River, encourage the passive surveillance of this this public space and act as a prototype for more permanent physical installations.

For the first three weeks of this four-week project, the BSc stage 1 students worked in teams of four and formulated the initial design concepts for these installations. At the beginning of their design process, the student teams met the client representatives, surveyed the project site and visited the local digital fabrication laboratory, where the installations would be constructed. Each installation had to be constructed from a mere 15 sheets of plywood. Following on from this, the emergent project proposals were presented to the teaching team, and the rest of the cohort, on a weekly basis, where verbal feedback was given. The client representatives participated in these teaching sessions on several occasions also. In the fourth week of the project, each design team was joined by three master's students for an intensive five-day workshop, where the more experience students helped to improve the designs and to further develop the proposals through the construction of scaled laser cut prototypes and a set of fabrication drawings. On the final day of this workshop, the refined proposals were presented to the client representatives, where they choose the winning designs. Five of the most innovative and impactful proposals were built at full scale and in-situ on the in later May 2018. They were seen by over 15,000 people.⁷

Public CoLab 2018 offered the students an opportunity to experience how a design process evolves from inception through to completion, to grapple with the multiple demands of a “real client” and to design within the constraints of a fixed budget and limited resources. More importantly, it enabled them to experience how architects can contribute to tackling sensitive social issues such as the promotion of positive mental health in public space. There were a number of pedagogical tactics that helped ensure the success of Public CoLab 2018 as an educational event. Firstly, having a generous, open-minded and flexible client, who wanted to immerse themselves in the design discussions and the construction process, was very beneficial. Their full participation helped to deepen the students’ understanding of the brief and confirmed to them that their input was appreciated. Secondly, the design teams worked well together because the BSc stage 1 students took the lead in the design process, before being joined by more experienced MArch students. This helped to negate any potential power asymmetries and to validate the ideas, concepts and propositions of the less experienced students. Correspondingly, the MArch students valued the opportunity to impart their technical skills and to guide the less experienced students in transforming their design concepts into buildable proposals. Thirdly, Public CoLab 2018 offered the students a rare opportunity, in architectural education, to see their projects come to fruition. Given the financial limitations, only some of the students’ projects could be built. This constraint helped to engender a healthy competitive spirit amongst the student cohort, focusing their attention so as to produce the most innovative designs and capture the client’s imagination.



Acknowledgements

Public CoLab 2018 was led by Dr. Nuala Flood, with support from Dr. Sarah Lappin, Dr. Jasna Mariotti, Mr. Niek Turner and Recomposing the City. Our Future Foyle is a collaboration between the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design and the Public Health Agency Northern Ireland. The author would like to express special thanks to Our Future Foyle, and to its principle researcher, Ralf Alwani, for initiating the collaboration with Public CoLab.

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⁷ "Derry has a High Suicide Rate - but could Redesigning the River Help the City?" The Guardian, last modified 10/09, accessed 09/09, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/sep/10/derry-has-a-high-suicide-rate-but-could-redesigning-the-river-help-the-city>.