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Designing Together in Covid Times

The Art of Creating an Effective Online Collaborative Design Charette for Architecture Students

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ABSTRACT:

Although the pandemic has forced architectural education to occur in physical isolation and predominantly online, this does not necessarily mean that we have to work alone. In this paper we present a case study of a design charette that demonstrates how collaboration can happen in architectural education in Covid times and how, in fact, collaboration can be enhanced by virtue of working online.

KEYWORDS: Post-Covid Public Space, Collaborative Design, Online Architectural Pedagogy

Introduction

This case study of a one-day online design charette demonstrates the pedagogical techniques, tactics and tools which enabled meaningful design collaboration to occur. They include enacting priming activities prior to the charette, encouraging engagement through setting a topical brief, guiding the students through an explicitly codified design process, facilitating associated time bound design exercises and using graphic communication and the online interface, in a supportive capacity. The 230 students from UCD and QUB worked in mixed teams of up to six people. The majority of the participants had not worked together previously, and yet, we observed that they collaborated effectively. It took careful design and planning to successfully create and run this event and builds on our research, practice and teaching, which focuses on participatory design (Flood 2016; Flood and Cruickshank 2018) innovative architectural pedagogy (Clancy and O'Hare, 2011, Flood 2018) and the curation of architecture (Farrell and McNamara 2018).

1. The Motivations

We were aware that because of working online the students missed the interaction, exchange and serendipity of the design studio. We were keen to explore modes of architectural pedagogy that went beyond an attempted replication of the physical studio and, instead, sought to leverage the potential of working online for the promotion of collaborative practice. The primary aim was to explore ways of working online that would support the development of these crucial skills in students by developing a virtual space to support “creative cooperative working” (Borden et al, 2010). By engaging with a different educational institution, we aimed to provide an opportunity for the students to experience different ways of working, skillsets, and approaches to design and, also, to expand their architectural network.

2. The Design Charette Brief

We identified a design problem that has relevance to the studio programmes in both institutions and associated cities (Belfast and Dublin). The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed the way we live our public lives, and there have been profound shifts in the way we use, occupy and dwell in public space (Sharifi and Khavarian-Garmsir 2020; Ülkeryıldız 2020; Wray, Fleming, and Gilliland 2020). We developed our brief based on three associated observations: Firstly, we were critically of spatial responses to the pandemic: ad-hoc tents, canopies, marquees that provided shelter but, being cheaply and hastily constructed, they made limited contribution to a quality public realm. Secondly, pre-Covid, both cities supported rich cultures for music and performance. The brief reflected a need for design strategies to support these cultures into the future. Thirdly, during the summer of 2020, when Covid restrictions relaxed, much of the social life of both cities gravitated outdoors towards any covered public space. We predict that there will be post-Covid behavioral legacies and, therefore, the city will need to provide well-ventilated and safe public space. The brief challenged the students to create generous and flexible sheltered public spaces that would meet the demands of the current public health emergency (walk-in testing and vaccination), while also providing a space where public life could flourish in the longer term.

3. The Priming Activities

Five days before the charette, we hosted an online introductory meeting via Zoom with all participants. We carried out ice-breaker activities using breakout rooms where students made quick sketch responses to brief, uploaded them to Miro and discussed these propositions. We also asked them to source examples of inspiring covered outdoor public spaces to share with their design team at the main event. These priming activities established a shared community of understanding and lent a momentum to and excitement about the charette.

4. The Design of the Infrastructure

We designed the virtual charette interface on Miro (a digital whiteboard) and used Zoom for video conferencing. The graphic layout of the whiteboard guided the students through the design process, while allowing for exchange and serendipity (see Figure 1). The intention was to create a virtual interface that was clear and easy to use whether working with high-speed broadband or mobile phone hotspot. At a fully zoomed out scale the whiteboard communicated the structure of the day, providing all of the relevant information to start the charette. Updates were communicated in real

time using the 'bring all to me' function in Miro. Zooming in, the whiteboard guided each team through each of the design exercises. The ongoing work of all teams was visible, enabling all participants to track other students' progress. The system could function on its own in the event of network disruptions and if we were unable to communicate with the students via Zoom. The digital whiteboard also serves as an archive of the work after the charette.

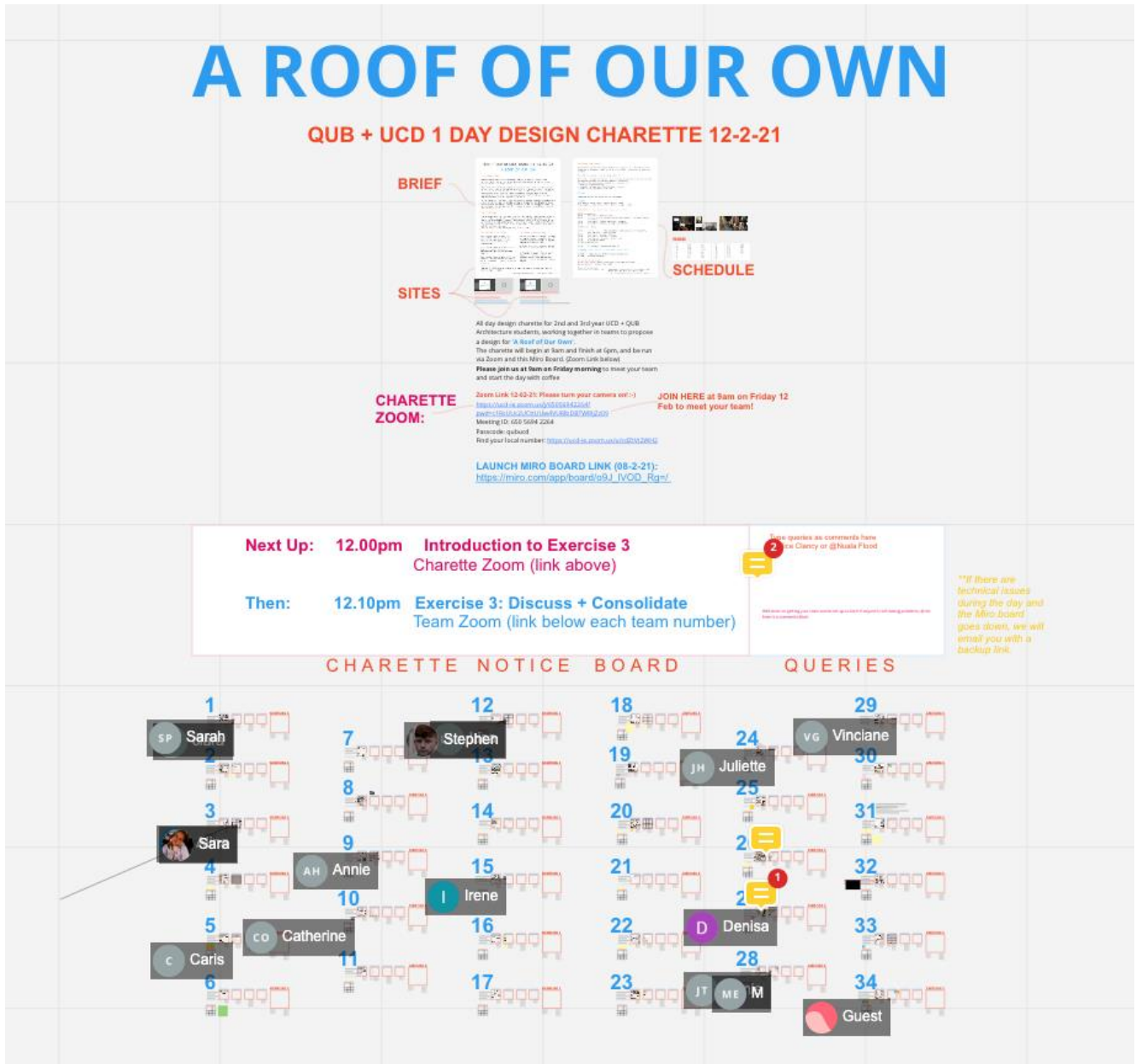


Figure 1 - The whiteboard layout

5. The Design Charette Event

The day began on one Zoom call with an introduction to the Miro board and to the design teams. These teams were selected in advance so that in combination, each had a diverse set of skills. We explicitly briefed the students to approach the event as a collaborative endeavour, to be generous with their ideas, to share insights, to borrow ideas where appropriate and to support each other throughout. Participation in

the event was a compulsory part of passing their larger studio module, but not graded.

The charette was divided into 6 discrete and timed exercises carried out in separate Zoom calls (See Figure 2). However, as all outputs were pinned to one Miro Board, each team could observe how all other teams were progressing. The design exercises were interspersed with regular breaks and by targeted and inspiring presentations by eminent architects. Yvonne Farrell, co-founder of Grafton Architects, spoke about the importance of effective collaboration in architecture and Prof. Nasrine Seraji, UCD, spoke about formative projects from her early career.

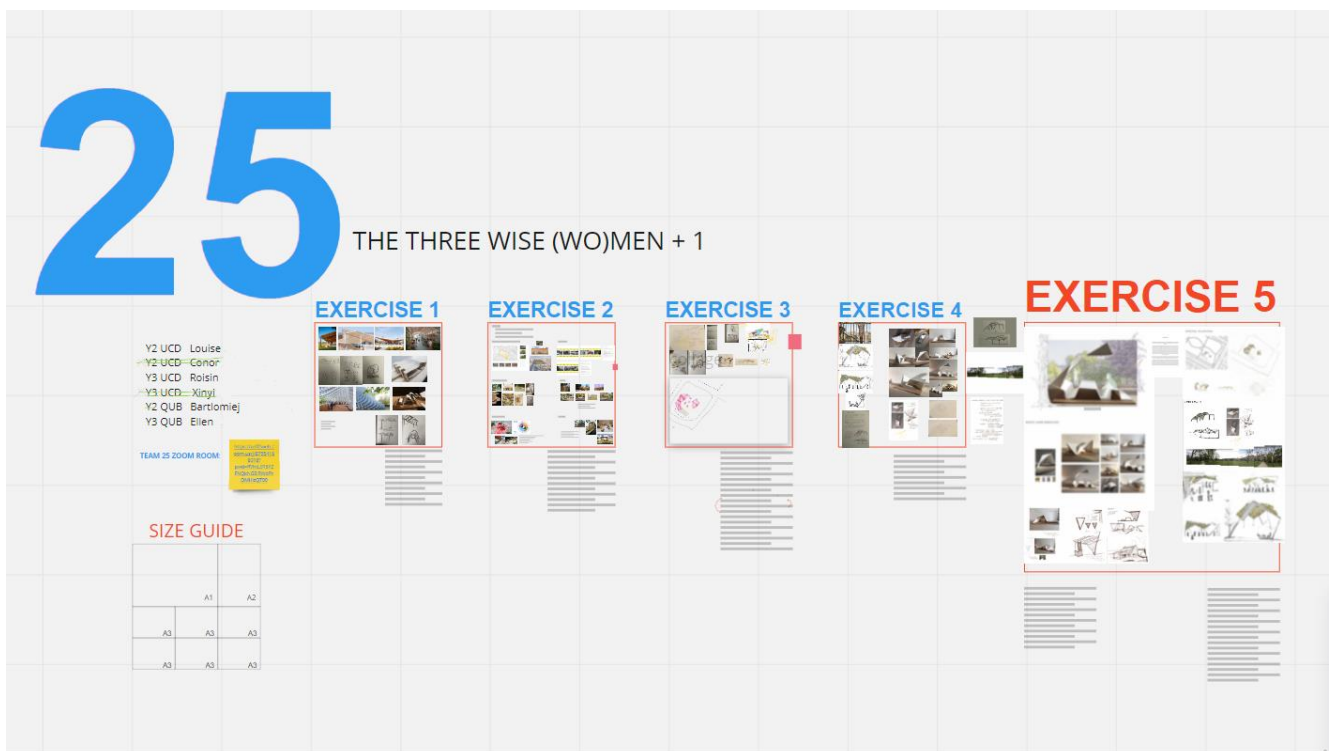


Figure 2 - The codified design process as communicated via discrete design exercises on the whiteboard

6. The Design Outcomes

The final submissions were assessed by a panel of judges and a winning entry chosen through a deliberation and consensus building process. We hosted an online celebratory event where the judges discussed the shortlisted projects and where the overall winner was announced.

Conclusion

As a case study, it presents a novel model for enabling a large group of people to meaningfully engage with collaborative design, while being facilitated by just two people. Crucial aspects of the approach include:

- Careful planning
- Codified design process, facilitated using digital tools
- Explicit about the overarching goal

- Signalled that having fun was a key objective
- Inspiring speakers with targeted presentations and specific times over the day to punctuate the process
- A topical brief that resonated with the whole student cohort
- Pass based on participation only
- Motivated with a prize

Feedback to the event was overwhelmingly positive, with students being energised by the experience. It was a transformative catalyst for the students and staff involved, taking us out of working in reaction to being online and into leveraging its potentials to creative ends.

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