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Designing Together in Covid Times

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Designing together in COVID times

by Alice Clancy and Nuala Flood

'The city is a collaboration, and the project is a collaboration ... just think of how cities are put together. All of us rely on others.'

Yvonne Farrell, QUB+UCD design charette, 12.02.21

Although the pandemic forced architectural education to occur in physical isolation and predominantly online, this does not necessarily mean that we have had to work alone. As we emerge from and reflect on a year of working online, there are things that we have learned that will undoubtedly expand and enhance how we teach in the studio when we return. Through presenting this case study of a one-day online collaborative design charette that we designed and facilitated, we propose that collaboration can happen in architectural education in COVID times, and can, perhaps, be enhanced by virtue of working online.

The charette brought together 230 stage-two and stage-three architecture students from University College Dublin (UCD) and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) on 12 February 2021. The students worked together in mixed teams of up to six people using the Miro and Zoom digital platforms. The cohorts, and many of the individuals, had not worked together previously, and yet, collaborated effectively over the day to create thirty-four detailed and compelling design propositions for 'A Roof of Our Own'; a covered public space where vaccines could be administered in the short term and where public life could thrive in the long term.

The motivations

In January 2021, after the spike in COVID-19 cases and the associated tightening of restrictions once more into full lockdown, all universities on the island were working online. As educators, there was a collective gritting of teeth as we headed into this third term of pandemic-altered teaching. We had previously pivoted quickly to online learning in the spring of 2020 and worked in a blended mode as restrictions relaxed in the autumn. Now that we were back fully online, we were feeling the pressure of yet again attempting to replicate virtually the rich environment of peer learning of the design studio; this time to students who were demotivated by the prospect of a third term online and struggling with zoom fatigue.

As Yvonne Farrell outlined in her talk to students during the charette, and quoted above in the introduction, architecture is a collaborative practice. At the heart of the pedagogical practice of both authors is this understanding that architectural design is a collaborative endeavour. We were aware that, in working online, students missed the interaction, exchange, and serendipity of the design studio. We were keen to explore modes of online 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.

Therefore, the primary aim of the charette was to explore ways of working online that would support the development of these crucial collaborative skills by developing a virtual space

to support 'creative cooperative working'.¹

The secondary aims were to combat the sense of isolation and lack of motivation many students reported experiencing; by engaging with a different educational institution, we aimed to provide an opportunity for students to experience different ways of working, skillsets, and approaches to design and, also, to expand their architectural network.

The design charette brief

For a charette brief, we identified a design problem that has relevance to students' studio programmes, that is common to both cities that the students are working in (Belfast and Dublin), but that also, crucially, addresses a timely issue that would capture their collective imagination.

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way we live our public lives. Over a very short period from March 2020, there were profound shifts in the way we use, occupy, and dwell in public space, with significant associated spatial consequences.²

We developed our brief based on three associated observations and in conversation with our colleagues at UCD and QUB. Firstly, we were critically aware of the ad-hoc tents, canopies, marquees, and awnings that have sprung up in Belfast and Dublin throughout the pandemic. Although they provided much needed ventilated and sheltered space in the city, these structures were made in haste, are cheaply constructed, and offer little as quality public space for the city in the longer term. Secondly, pre-COVID, both Belfast and Dublin supported rich cultures of music and performance. Throughout the pandemic, the lack of musical and theatrical performances was palpable. Thirdly, during the summer of 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions were somewhat relaxed, we observed how much of the social life of both cities was taking place outdoors. Despite the weather, people gravitated towards any public space that was covered: bandstands, trees, overhangs.

There will be post-COVID behavioural legacies and, therefore, the post-COVID city will need to provide well-ventilated and safe public space in which to socialise. We challenged the students to create such generous³ and flexible sheltered public spaces that would meet the demands of the current public health emergency, while simultaneously providing a space where public life might flourish in a dignified, delightful, comfortable, and beautiful way in the post-pandemic world. On a pragmatic level, we stipulated that the students' design propositions should accommodate a walk-in testing and vaccination centre, allowing for a range of social distancing requirements, and also be capable of facilitating musical performances, picnics, and parties. We also challenged the students to be mindful of the materials and construction techniques employed and their residual effect on the earth.

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 the 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.

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The design of the infrastructure

We drew on our experiences of working online to design the virtual charette interface. 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, and that supported collaborative work of over two-hundred people working together. It was set up using Miro (a digital whiteboard) to be used in parallel with Zoom video conferencing.

The graphic layout of the whiteboard guided the students through the design process, while allowing for exchange and serendipity. 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.

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 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.

The charette was divided into six discrete and timed exercises carried out in separate Zoom calls. 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, launched the charette with a rousing talk about the importance of effective collaboration in architectural design, motivating the students to see the value in their own work and in that of their peers. At lunchtime, Prof. Nasrine Seraji (UCD) spoke about one of her earliest projects, inspiring the students to develop the detail in their design proposals, to consider how their design proposals could be 'mantled and dismantled'.

Towards the end of the day, the students presented their work to each other in peer review sessions, before finalising their proposal and uploading it for consideration by the charette judges.

The design outcomes

The teams of students produced thirty-four innovative and compelling design responses to the spatial issues posed by the pandemic that explore ideas about the flexible use of covered outdoor space and considered approaches to materiality, construction, and deconstruction.

The final submissions were assessed by a panel of judges from UCD and QUB: Hugh Campbell, Greg Keeffe, Sarah Lappin, Michael McGarry, James Rossa O'Hare, and Nasrine Seraji).

The winning entry and shortlist were chosen through deliberation and a consensus-building process. We hosted an online celebratory event where the judges discussed the shortlisted projects and where the overall winner was announced.

The future of designing online

We have found that working online in this way lent a concentration and focus to the day that produced very strong design responses. Due to the large numbers of students participating, the charette would have proved challenging and perhaps impossible to organise in person while producing similarly strong design responses.

As a case study, the charette presents a novel model for enabling a large group of people to meaningfully engage with collaborative design to respond to a topical design challenge, while being facilitated by just two people. Our methodology drew on our experience and included careful planning: enacting priming activities prior to the charette, encouraging engagement through setting a topical brief, guiding 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.

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.

The success of the charette and the strength of the students' design proposals have left us with two concluding thoughts. Firstly, could working online in this way provide us with a methodology for collaborating at a larger scale to address the pertinent design issues and challenges of our time? And secondly, as we embark on revitalising post-Covid public space, younger people might have a key role to play in this process. The students come from one of the demographics arguably most affected by pandemic restrictions, a demographic who have, of late, been criticised for how they have been using public space in cities as restrictions ease. In this charette, the design proposals demonstrate creativity and thoughtfulness in meeting both the pragmatic and social demands placed on public outdoor spaces due to pandemic restrictions. It might be advantageous for those working on the regeneration of post-Covid public space to engage with this demographic and to tap their knowledge, ideas and creativity.

A summary of the charette and the full set of shortlisted entries can be viewed here: <https://www.ucdarch.com/second-year-studio>.

Acknowledgements

Well done to all of the students who participated and produced such engaging design propositions.

Congratulations to the winning team: Team 25 aka 3 Wise Wo(men)+1, Roisin McConnon and Louise Kelly from UCD and Ellen McKeag and Bartolomiej Ziobrowski from QUB.

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Notes

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