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Let the Power of Live Projects Combine

This paper proposes a method by which schools of architecture and design can engage with the development of their surrounding contexts in a meaningful and practical way. This method will be illustrated using a case study of a five-day environmental design event that brought together small groups of architecture students, from Queen's University Belfast, with eleven clients from East Belfast. Working in collaboration, they created architectural responses to a variety of client-identified spatial issues. The research and design was undertaken in a pop-up laboratory situated in a formerly empty retail space and in the very neighbourhood where all eleven projects were situated. This location became a space where multiple stakeholders could both express their aspirations for the locality and experiment with giving these ambitions form through creative conversations with the students. By externalising their thoughts, in the shared context of the laboratory, the clients revealed a variety of other perspectives about the future of the area. The individual projects acted as props to talk through, while the overall event acted as both a platform for initiating dialogue between multiple interested parties and as an instrument for the cultivation of new understandings about the area of the city under study. In addition, as a meaningful pedagogical experience, it provided students the opportunity to work with real clients and real projects in real time. Thus, this case study offers a promising method for other schools of architecture and design to contribute to the development of their city.

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Introduction

Similar to most post-conflict landscapes, the built environment in Belfast bears the scars of a turbulent past. A bombardment of German air raids in 1941 destroyed large swaths of the city, including 3200 homes, and the period of ethno-nationalist violence, known as 'the Troubles', which lasted from 1969 until 1998, resulted in its further dismantle. During this latter time the borders between the already segregated Loyalist (nominally Protestant) communities and Republican (nominally Catholic) communities were physically consolidated. 'Peace walls' or linear concrete structures topped with barbed wire and interspersed with large-scale metal 'curfew gates' were created at fractious intersections. This physical segregation was added to through the creation of strategically-placed motorways (Bryan 2012). To escape the violence, many people relocated from the city centre to more suburban areas. In 1971, the inner city core was home to around 600,000 people, but by 1991 its population had decreased by 33% (Fredrick 1995). Today, derelict buildings and vacant sites are still a recurring feature across the city and public spaces continue to display cultural manifestations of conflict in the

form of flags, murals, bunting and painted kerbstones. As a school of architecture that wants to contribute to the improvement of shared spaces in the locality, operating in such politicised and circumscribed landscape is a complex undertaking. Yet, we recognise that we are not impotent in this matter: we have design skills, spatial knowledge, imagination and future-orientated thinking; all very valuable, if channelled in the right direction. Nonetheless, we must also deliver a meaningful educational experience to the student. Bearing these issues in mind, this article presents Street Society 2015: an environmental design event where groups of eight to ten undergraduate and post-graduate Queen's University Belfast architecture students spent five days working with eleven clients from East Belfast with the shared goal of creating an architectural response to a particular, client-identified issue. It presents a model by which other schools of architecture might approach working in – and contributing to – the healing of contested landscapes.

Contextualising the case study

Street Society is an annual event, which was initiated in 2010 and has occurred on an annual basis since then. Its basic remit has
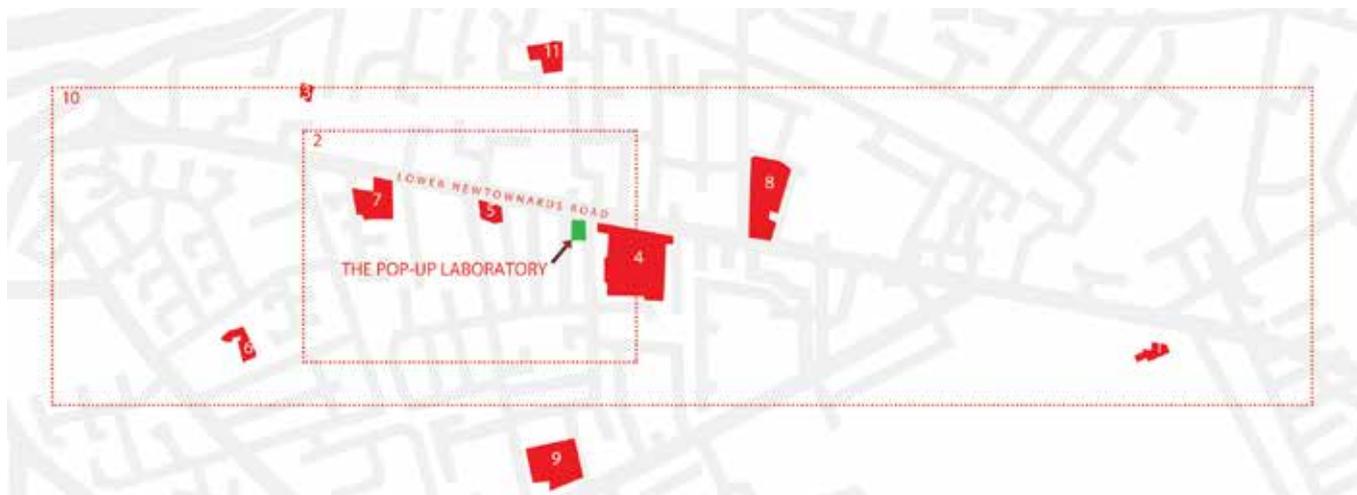
LOWER NEWTOWNARDS ROAD

THE POP-UP LABORATORY

remained the same each year: to bring the skills and energies of architecture students to approximately ten clients from the not-for-profit, community or voluntary sector (Morrow, Brown 2012, Flood, McCafferty 2016). Since the project's inception, Street Society design teams have built city models; developed street furniture designs; designed new buildings; generated proposals for the re-use of derelict sites; contributed to village development plans and created new processes for social engagement processes.

Street Society is a unique permutation of a 'live project' – an established architectural pedagogical experience - which offers students the opportunity to work with a real client on a real problem to be investigated within a limited timeframe (Dodd, Harrisson 2012). As a pedagogical tool, live projects were conceived in reaction to the traditional mode of architectural education whereby students work from the confines of the design studio, making speculative proposals in response to a hypothetical brief. This latter pedagogical approach has been the subject of much critique, including concerns that it is overly focused on the creation of form to the detriment of the cultivation of a deeper competence in issues pertaining to 'real world' architectural practice, such as contending with multiple political, social and ethical issues (Doidge, Sara et al. 2007, Till 2009). In contrast, by collaborating with a client from outside the university, a live project enables the architecture student to be immersed in the complexities of 'real world' contingencies. This approach promises mutual benefits for both the client and the student, with the client gaining architectural insights, ideas and proposals; while the student experiences the intricacies

of working with a real client with particular needs (Brown 2012).

In 2015, all of the individual Street Society live projects were anchored to the same geographical location for the first time. This was done with a view to facilitate opportunity for cross-learning between each of the projects, the design teams and the clients. Therefore, each individual project was conceived as a constituent component of a larger constellation of projects. Together, they are intended as catalysts for a broader conversation about the geographical area under study and its future. In this way, Street Society 2015 could be viewed as an experiment in planning-by-projects whereby instances of 'urban acupuncture' (or thoughtful, strategic, discreet and catalytic interventions), are linked to a larger-scale project framework which can support and guide the individual interventions to achieve macro-level sustainable change (Manzini, Rizzo 2011).

In line with this strategy, Street Society 2015 partnered with Urban Villages, a government-led, urban development initiative that supports regeneration in five discrete areas in towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland (OFMDFM 2013). Through its work, Urban Villages aims to improve 'good relations' and to 'develop thriving places where there has been a history of deprivation and community tension' (SIB 2016). All of the live projects that made up Street Society 2015 were located within the East Belfast Urban Village area, as delineated by the Urban Villages initiative. By collaborating with this initiative, the project outcomes of Street Society attained access to a larger audience, made up of people (including government representatives), who are responsible for

Figure 2: The launch of Street Society 2015

implementing the overall regeneration program in Belfast. In this way, the Street Society 2015 projects had an opportunity to directly inform Belfast's regeneration program and thereby bring about a positive, longer-term impact on the city.

For the duration of the project, Street Society 2015 operated from a pop-up laboratory which was created in the Skyline building, a formerly vacant retail unit on the Newtownards Road, the main thoroughfare passing through the study area. The laboratory space was open to all participants in the Street Society project: the clients from the local community; the representatives from the government-led urban regeneration initiative; as well as university staff and students. This pop-up working space was referred to as a *'laboratory'* and not a *'studio'*, in order to emphasise the experimental nature of Street Society and to signify it as a place where new ideas could emerge, new relationships could be built and new projects could be catalysed. The intention was that the laboratory would act as an environment for the cross-pollination of ideas and learning, not only among the students, but also among the clients and the government representatives.

Street Society 2015, it must be stressed, was conceived of as something different

to the university-affiliated community design centres that were established in the UK and in the US in the 1970's with a view to providing local-level architectural and planning assistance to communities which would otherwise not have had access to these services (Jenkins, Pereira et al. 2009). Unlike the university-affiliated community design centres, Street Society 2015 did not promise to deliver an architectural service to the client. Rather, it was regarded as a space for experimentation and as an instrument to facilitate the emergence of projects to be co-designed by the students and clients.

Street Society 2015 also drew on the idea of collaborative planning, a practice which emerged in the 1980's in response to market-driven urban development. Collaborative planning is an inclusive approach to shaping social space, one which is progressed through dialogue between multiple stakeholders, based on a relational understanding of space and a social constructivist worldview. It is inclusive of all types of knowledge and it values experiential and tacit knowledge, in particular (Healey 1997). Collaborative planning does not prescribe a definitive methodology. Rather, it advocates certain principles and approaches which are adapted to suit the particularities of local contexts and which are neither top-down

Figure 3:Collaborative design in the pop-up laboratory

nor expert-driven (Brand, Gaffikin 2007). It extends beyond dualistic, participatory approaches, whereby users are invited to give input to the design process only, in a purely reactionary manner. Participatory approaches have often resulted in the design relationship evolving in an adversarial manner and are at odds with the pluralistic world with its many stakeholders and actors: profit-making organisations, non-profit organisations, various interest groups and public administrators. The challenge for collaborative planners is to integrate all these different actors from the outset, and to give them the opportunity to interact with one another, while at the same time allowing them to act independently. In other words, collaborative planning is a *'multi-dimensional model where communication, learning and action are joined together and where the polity, interests and citizenry co-evolve'* (Innes, Booher 2004).

Thus, Street Society 2015 was conceptualised as a place-based, city design laboratory, and as a platform for facilitating collaborative city development by providing a shared space in which multiple stakeholders could express their desires for the future of the locality and could experiment with giving their ambitions form, through creative conversations with the architectural students. It aimed to act as a

platform for the initiation of dialogue between multiple interested parties and for the cultivation of new understandings of place.

The Unfolding of Street Society 2015

At the Street Society 2015 launch, 80 students gathered in the pop-up laboratory for the first time. To begin, representatives from Urban Villages described their program and gave some background information about the study area. After this, the clients arrived and they were introduced to their design team. Both parties read the project handbook, which outlines the working methods, the roles and responsibilities of all participants, highlights the experimental nature of the projects and, thus, encourages the clients to be open to unexpected responses from the students. After signing the participation contracts, the clients and their design teams clustered in designated areas of the laboratory for initial discussions. Each of the Street Society design teams were then guided around the study area by their clients. For the remainder of the week, the groups developed their proposals, meeting with their client regularly to discuss the progress and gain feedback.

On the final day of the event, 150 people attended a celebratory exhibition opening where the design team presented the

Figure 4: Collaborative design in the pop-up laboratory

outcomes to the clients, the Urban Villages representatives, the local community, a number of politicians, government advisors and civil servants. Each of the design teams built an exhibition in the laboratory to communicate the outcome of their design process. Many of the exhibits presented images of alternative future scenarios in East Belfast. For instance, one such image described how an existing and prominent brownfield site could be transformed into a thriving market place for local small businesses using strategically located shipping containers and a carefully curated program of activities. This helped the client, a local and not-for-profit community development organisation, articulate and visualise their ambition to enliven the streets in the area and to return the locality to the bustling commercial hub that it once was. In other projects, the output comprised a physical product. For instance, one of the clients, a community liaison officer, noted that he found it difficult to get local people enthused about community development issues. In response, the design team created an engaging, playful and reusable community consultation toolkit. Other projects presented a piece of research. For

example, one design team was asked to explore the unique acoustic environment in East Belfast. They identified particular locations where signature sounds, which contributed to the creation of a sense of place, were produced: beside the metal shutters of retail units, at the ‘peace walls’ and in the vicinity of the church bells. They explored the idea of sound heritage and how particular acoustic environments could be protected through mapping and recording. Other design teams presented masterplans for the area in response to a particularly pertinent concern of the client. For instance, Cancer Focus NI asked the students to examine how East Belfast currently accommodates activities which support cancer prevention and how the area could be improved, in this regard, in the future. In response, a health-promoting plan for the area was created and it included a series of community allotments, the planting of the ‘peace walls’ with vertical gardens and the design of a safe and direct cycle lane linking East Belfast to the existing cycle network. Other clients, such as the local training centre, asked the students to design a discrete building. They required an ‘outdoor classroom’ to accommodate

a broad range of learning activities for all age groups, to convey a sense of openness, to be a welcoming space and to allow for flexibility in use. The students responded with a proposal for a largely transparent and flexible structure and information about potential funding streams that the clients could avail of to help further develop their idea. Thus, the overall event produced a wide range of outcomes for the clients.

The Impact of Street Society 2015

Street Society 2015 delivered benefits to the participating clients and the architecture students. It allowed the clients to access the creativity and ideas of a group of enthusiastic architecture students. It helped them visualise their desires; it opened up new possibilities about how their goals might be realised and it expanded on their vision for the area. It offered the students invaluable *'hands-on'* experience in dealing with the complexities of real-world issues and real-world clients. The clients noted that they were happy with the outcomes and some of them conceded that the work had far exceeded their expectations. Three of the client groups, with support from the Urban Villages initiative, have used the students' work in subsequent funding

applications to further develop their projects. One of these projects, the outdoor classroom, secured funding and is now in the process of being realised.

As intended, the Street Society 2015 catalysed conversations about the future of the area that extended beyond the scope of the individual projects. Many of the clients noted that one of the most beneficial outcomes was being exposed to all of the other projects and having the opportunity to interact with the other community groups. It helped refocus the collective conversation away from past conflict and towards a solution-focused and brighter mutual future. In December 2015, the Urban Villages initiative completed a working document which outlines the development strategy for the *'EastSide Urban Village'*. This document notes that the proposals, which emerged from Street Society 2015, helped inform the final local development strategy.

Reflecting on Street Society 2015 as a method of engagement for schools of architecture and design

Locating all of the projects within a limited geographical area offered many benefits

Figure 6: Presenting the project outcomes to the clients

the representatives of the government-led regeneration initiative. The students' proposals initiated conversations between disparate groups of people about the future and potential of the area.

Establishing the pop-up laboratory within the study area also offered many benefits. It allowed the students to develop an in-depth understanding of the place they were developing projects for. By carrying out their everyday lives there – buying coffee and groceries; taking public transport; parking; socialising – they were able to discern how life operates in the area. Also, these casual occurrences allowed them to have impromptu conversations with people from the area, thus garnering further insights. Most significantly, the creation of the pop-up laboratory also had a positive, direct influence on the immediate locality. Occupying a building that was formerly vacant presented an alternative reading of the structure and its surrounding context. The hitherto closed shutters of the building were opened and 80 industrious students inhabited the space, making models, sketching, discussing and drawing. From the street, the various design-related activities were clearly visible to the passer-by. Therefore, the adjoining public spaces were infused with new life and a sense of vibrancy. This act of occupation signified a discreet, short-term revitalisation of this part of the city and was, in itself, an instance of 'urban acupuncture'. Additionally, at the celebratory closing event, the pop-up laboratory provided the physical setting for the project exhibition, thereby allowing the individual clients to see their projects in relation to the other projects. In this way, the pop-up laboratory, through the group exhibition it ultimately accommodated, represented a platform on which to ignite further creative conversations, to provoke questions, and to strike up non-adversarial debate about the future of the area.

Partnering with Urban Villages, the government-led urban regeneration initiative brought value to Street Society 2015 in a number of ways. In addition to securing the venue for the pop-up laboratory, Urban Villages donated support in-kind, including: insurance for the building; electricity; and catering for the closing event. Perhaps even more crucially, Urban Villages provided sensitive negotiating

to the Street Society 2015. On a practical level, all of the design teams were able to mix and share resources and information, and because of this sharing process, they could build a rich understanding of the surrounding context in an efficient manner. However, more importantly, the study area provided a common denominator for all the stakeholders involved. It acted as another participant in the process and as an instrument for grounding dialogue between the students, the academics, the clients and

and social navigation skills. Through their long-established relationship with the community in East Belfast, they helped source eleven clients that were keen to access the students' creativity, architectural insight and visualisation skills. Furthermore, Urban Villages acted as trusted gatekeepers through which to introduce the students to the various participating clients. As a result of this partnership with Urban Villages, the potential impact of each individual live project was amplified in such a way that Street Society 2015, as a whole, managed to influence development policy for the area.

That said, Street Society 2015 had to compromise in certain areas as a consequence of the partnership with Urban Villages. For instance, some of the project briefs presented by the regeneration agency were too prescriptive and did not offer enough scope for multiple interpretations by the students. This paper recommends that future iterations of Street Society further emphasise that the project is primarily an experimental process and a creative encounter that aims to aerate discussions amongst all stakeholders involved - academics, government representatives, clients and the local community. In this respect, it would be beneficial to reframe Street Society as a pedagogical event not only for the students, but for all of the participants.

Conclusion

If the engagement method presented in this paper started a future orientated, optimistic and positive collective conversation in a difficult context such as

Belfast, then its successful application in less contentious locations is all the more likely. It suggests a potential practical mechanism for channelling the skills, knowledge and creativity embedded in schools of architecture and design towards the collaborative development of their surrounding contexts and local development polices.

Figure 7: Internal view of the design for the 'outdoor classroom', which is now in the process of being realised

Figure 8: Cross section through the *'outdoor classroom'*