

The Pedagogy of Place: A Practical Approach to Engaging with Urban Design Lessons beyond the Studio.

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Abstract

The distinction between various quantifiable and qualitative interpretations of *place* across academic and professional disciplines of the built environment presents a challenge to educators seeking to engage students with a balance of theory knowledge and practical skills for meaningful urban investigation. This paper examines a pedagogic framework developed in response to this challenge. By integrating abstract and experiential methods to study the city, the framework includes a series of teaching, learning and assessment methods that link phenomenological *place* theory with evidence-based activities for *place-making* in city spaces.

Using qualitative and anecdotal feedback from a collaborative project involving undergraduate architecture and visual [graphic] communications students in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the paper discusses the project outcomes, evaluating some of the methods and the tools used to educate architects and designers for better skills to understand urban issues beyond the classroom.

Keywords: architecture, visual-communications, urban design, pedagogy, phenomenology, public space, place, placemaking, experiential learning, Belfast.

Introduction

In an increasingly urbanised global society, the role of architects in the processes that shape and make cities is more complex than ever. Ongoing issues include 'design' versus 'procurement', more diverse professional teams and debates over educating future professionals with a balance of theory knowledge and practical skill to deliver quality *places* (Jenkins, et al, 2005). From the many examples of poor quality spaces in contemporary cities, there is a need to revisit what is advocated in theory for the design of cities and the reality of what is often created. Writing about this disparity, after a 15-year study of public spaces in New York and other major cities, William H. Whyte (1988:109) observed that:

"[It] is difficult to design a space that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished."

Whyte, like his European counterpart Jan Gehl (1971), carefully observed the interactions of people with other people and with their surrounding environments in 'real-time'; documenting the influence of design, the presence of visual clues, activities or other elements that could help explain why some city spaces attracted people while others did not. These studies provided evidence in Whyte's search for the "basics" (1980:101), his concept of those qualities that "enrich the experience of city spaces, turning them into *places*."

To improve the relationship between the practice and pedagogy of architecture and urban design, the challenge for research is to harness those qualities of *place*. The difficulty is that these qualities are not always explicit, but as Whyte noted (1980:58), can appear "as much psychological as physical." This raises more questions about whether architectural research could help understand and translate lessons from the city back into the education of future designers and planners, as well as allied professions, policy makers, the public and all others who may positively influence development in the built environment.

To consider this question, this paper presents research on an interdisciplinary pilot project run jointly by the Departments of Architecture and Visual [Vis-Com] Communication at the University of Ulster [UU] in Belfast, Northern Ireland during September 2009 to May 2010. The research evaluates the project's pedagogic framework, its core structure, process and main outcomes, which combined general educational theory and methods with specific theory and tools for urban or architectural design.

This question of pedagogy versus practice in architecture has been growing arguably since the Enlightenment while debates about how to address growing cities came to the fore in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. This paper begins therefore at the start of the twentieth century, before the “new” profession of town planning split from architecture, affecting both of their associated educational systems. In 1915, Geddes forewarned of a split in his treatise, *Cities in Evolution*, advocating an alternative to traditional aesthetic or technically aligned training. Geddes (1915:298) proposed combining the social art of architecture and the “emerging” science of planning with what he referred to as *the study of civics*, the study of “the life and working of the city.”

In pedagogic terms related to architecture, urban planning and design, this paper revisits Geddes’ and Whyte’s definitions of *civics* and *basics*; interpreting both as referring to the experiential, phenomenological, and measurable qualities of cities at the same time. This forms the basis for an investigation of design pedagogy that addresses *place* as a theoretical construct of the “ideal” city and as evidence-based activities associated with making or shaping “actual” cities. The research also combines literature from a broader scope of pedagogic theory that calls for greater *alignment* (Biggs, 2003) between teaching, learning and assessment activities, as well as the use of more relevant methods that promote students’ development of independent skills for *active learning*, *reflection* and *critical thinking* (Kolb, 1984; Krathwohl, 2002). The pedagogic model discussed in this paper has developed from these precedents and further exploration will be required for future refinement.

Within the context of the pilot study with undergraduate students, the developing pedagogic framework considered the balance between traditional reading and lecture based activities alongside active, collaborative teaching, learning and assessment tools outside the classroom environment. In practical terms, this addressed the skills future designers need for working with communities, other professions and government to improve the outcome of architecture and urban design projects. It further aimed to challenge preconceptions about working in urban environments, especially neglected areas of existing cities.

To prepare to undertake activities requiring interaction between staff, students and outside participants in public and to collect data for the analysis, the project was assessed for a health, safety and ethics risks though UU’s Research Governance and Ethics Review Panel,

and relevant statutory authorities. After the project, conclusions were drawn from the data collected, primarily anonymous qualitative surveys and anecdotal feedback from the students and staff, professionals, local government representatives and members of the public who took part in different stages of the process.

Belfast: Context & Partnerships

With the UU Schools of Architecture, Art and Design located in Belfast city centre, their context provides a rich backdrop for research addressing neglected urban environments. Despite its own particular, violent ethno-political history over the last forty years, Belfast’s situation as a post-industrial port city of approximately 200,000 inhabitants offers opportunities to tackle more universal problems the city shares with others around the world. These include the disconnection caused by past decisions on planning, roads and other transport infrastructure, the loss of traditional industry and inner residents. Significantly, the city retains a very compact core, easily crossed on foot, with distinct areas of high quality Victorian and Art Deco buildings and pedestrian friendly streetscapes. These are in close proximity to areas of economic and social deprivation and physical blight for direct comparison.

The project study is one of the latter examples of neglect where recent development pressure and a 1980s retail mall, more than the past decades of violence, led to extensive demolition and loss of independent trade. These sites remain undeveloped or as surface car parking alongside the remnants of Victorian terraces and a once vibrant market (Fig. 1). The area is northwest of the city’s established Central Business District [CBD] and south of UU’s Belfast campus, a 5 to 10minute walk from the city’s symbolic centre at City Hall.

Fig. 1: Sample of Belfast study area (Author)



The focus on this particular area evolved from an approach to the University in 2009 by a group of local independent traders and government representatives seeking assistance with their efforts at staving off further destruction and promoting regeneration proposals for the area instead. The photographs in Fig. 2, taken ten years apart from the same location in the study area, illustrate the challenge. They show the typical extent of lost streetscape, poor quality public space, cut-off streets, blank walls and a lack of positive activity.

Fig. 2: Streetscape: Ca. 2000 & 2010 (Author)



Carrying out a project in this area presented a joint opportunity for Architecture and Visual Communications. Both departments share strategic aims about pursuing the social art of design through place-specific projects – buildings, landscape, urban design or visual and graphic interventions. The agreement to work with local groups outside the University was on the basis that the assistance meant student-led investigations without a particular agenda. For students this was an opportunity to have a real impact with their work. The project was therefore titled *What's Wrong with This Place?: Urban Research Belfast* as an invitation to the participants to question the perceptions and preconceptions about the area's neglected appearance, as well as explore the untapped potential beneath that surface.

Pedagogic Framework

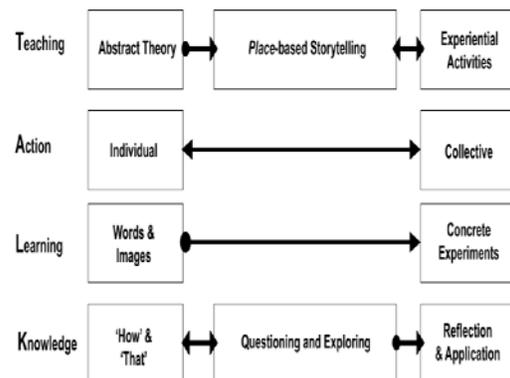
To develop the pedagogic model for these investigations, the review of educational practice, discourse and precedent described previously raised questions about the correct balance of outreach versus more traditional studio projects. The validity of abstract studio based methods, derived primarily from the French Beaux Arts Academies and British practice of pupillage, has long been challenged as contributing to an image-conscious “silo” mentality by focusing too much on individual ideas or technical ability over spatial experience, and promoting a fascination with uniqueness over developing the skills to “learn” from everyday life (Schon, 1987; Boyer and Mitgang, 1996, Morrow, 2000; Scobey, 2002).

As an alternative to the potential isolation of studio-based paper projects, interactive methods offer a practical approach that has been adapted into this research to test their potential to help students to:

- put the abstract study of the qualities of *place* into practice, combining the art and science of urbanism.
- engage in community-based design activities
- develop greater criticality about their own experiences in the city and
- gain empathy for the needs and vision of local communities

By amalgamating the various teaching and learning approaches through a series of test configurations, the current pedagogic model emerged as shown in Fig. 3 below. Its four strands of Teaching, Action, Learning and Knowledge (T.A.L.K.) encapsulate the aims of the process to engage students with learning and interacting outside the classroom. Three general steps work across the strands moving from abstract to experiential application, with some steps relating in both directions.

Fig. 3: Pedagogic model. T.A.L.K. (Author)



The strands work together toward learning outcomes that shift away from a reliance on individual image-based Design scenarios alone, toward more collective working, experiential activities and experiments that are meant to encourage reflection and eventually independent application of the abstract ideas in practice. The place-based storytelling steps apply to investigations undertaken for architecture, urban design or visual communications projects.

The collective aim for this study was to bring students away from their comfort zones, working with each other, with different disciplines and with members of the local residential and business community, built environment professionals and government representatives. Through this collaborative, participatory and evaluative framework, the overall goal was to help students understand urban environments, not just by describing what they see but learning to objectively explore beyond their preconceptions and become influential "story tellers" (Marris, 1990) in their own way. If successful, they might not only develop new skills as more iterative and holistic designers, but might begin to have greater self-awareness and confidence to transfer these skills into their ongoing education, and future careers.

A sense of place

"Architecture is bound to situation. Unlike music, painting, sculpture film and literature, a construction (non-mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place." (Holl, 1991: 9)

Beginning in September 2009, the first teaching and learning activities were run within the design studio, combining historical background on the study area with more peer-led discussion aimed at demonstrating ways to communicate abstract ideas to others. The aim here was to avoid formal lecturing but still allow for teaching and learning on the main concepts of *place*. A series of well-know published texts was used to establish a knowledge base of phenomenological theories about *place* and improve students' associated vocabulary.

Genius Loci (Norberg-Schulz, 1979) for example, was selected for its influential adaptation of Heidegger's complex metaphysical philosophy of *dwelling* and *being* for architectural education. Norberg-Schulz's use of concepts like *earth and sky* and *spirit of place*, in relation to architecture, have become part of a standard teaching lexicon.

His specific reference to other influential texts such as *Image of the City* by Kevin Lynch (1961), also introduces important theories about defining structures in urban space that aid [human] orientation, which have particular relevance to the current project research.

Other important required reading included:

- Bloomer, Moore and Lyndon's *Body, Memory and Architecture* (1977),
- Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1962),
- Holl's introductory essay in *Anchoring* (1991:9-12)
- Zumthor's "A way of Looking at Things" in *Thinking Architecture* (2006: 7-28).

Body, Memory and Architecture introduces the phenomenological poetics of Bachelard (1969) and the related sensorial perception theories of J.J. Gibson (1966). This sets out the explicitly humanist framework that significantly distinguishes perception between passive receptors and haptic senses, which actively seek out new information through adventure and experimentation.

Experiencing Architecture offers in-depth lessons about innate human abilities to engage with the physical world, and relates to the separate education theories about *active learning* noted earlier. Rasmussen's mix of everyday examples provides an accessible narrative meant to help students use similar references from their own experience of the built environment.

Finally, Holl and Zumthor's work was selected as contemporary examples from practicing architects who have established international careers with a mutual focus on phenomenology in their conceptual un-built projects and research as well as their writing and testing through practice. Holl in particular is very explicit about the influence of phenomenology on his architecture (Yorgancioglu, 2010), especially the translated writings of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962). Zumthor's own writing about his architecture offers an equally accessible description of the connections from his practice to the phenomenological experience in his own memories.

These selections are varied enough in complexity for undergraduates so that they may be of use to students of varying knowledge or interest in the subject. They were also intended to show students how words, while not replacing actual experience of *place* or architecture can be used to tell a convincing "story" about specific environments and constructions, which can aid design.

During the one-day discussion session, working in small groups, students were asked to share and document their reactions and understanding of the themes in each reading. This session also introduced students to the workshop format as an informal information gathering method, which they would be asked to use themselves in the next activity outside of studio.

Active experience research methods

“When you study a place and chart it and map it, you begin to acquire a proprietary right in it. You do not reason this. Obviously, you have no such right. But you feel it. It is your place. You earned it.” (Whyte, 1980: 110)

To move the teaching and learning from paper to testing of the principles discussed, in live scenarios, a number of field investigations were planned, inspired by the methods used by Whyte and Gehl. These required students to interact directly with people outside of their controlled academic environments. This type of socially active investigation has been referred to as *participatory action research*, “a way of creating knowledge that involves learning from investigating and applying what is learned to collective problems through social action” (Park, 1992, cited in Rios, 2006: 49-50).

Three additional case study precedents for these investigative activities were also considered; NY based Project for Public Spaces’ *Placemaking* training (2005), the London based Architecture Foundation’s participatory *Road Shows* (2000) and a previous community-led “live” research project in Northern Ireland that also involved students of architecture from the University of Ulster (McQueen et al, 2008).

The above preparation raised the following new questions for this research:

- How do you develop the confidence in young students of design to take over a street or a space and experiment, or consult more effectively with local communities and the public prior to any attempts at imposing design ideas?
- How do you gather information from the public - formally, behind a camera, clipboard or microphone, or informally with more social activities?
- How can the qualitative activities of investigation by individual students be structured within an evaluative framework for staff and researchers to collect relevant data and draw conclusions?

Two primary activities were subsequently developed and implemented during a weeklong series of joint events in February 2010.

Passive versus Activated Space: Mobile Urban Experience Labs [MUELS]

The first activity outside of the studio took inspiration directly from Whyte’s notion of “triangulation” (1980: 94). Whyte used this term to describe “the process by which some external stimulus provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as though they were not.”

Although Whyte was primarily observing the effects of existing objects, sculptures, performers or even particular views from a given space, this project used a two-stage activity combining observation with direct interaction and experimentation through the invention of the M.U.E.L. or Mobile Urban Experience Lab.

The design, construction and then intervention using the MUELS first involved a studio based team project for architecture students, with graphic design input from Vis-Com students. The MUEL acronym refers to the brief given to each team to design a temporary movable object based around a particular human sense, adapted for testing out different aspects of perception around the city. The proviso was that the object should be constructed from readily available or recycled materials, that it would be ‘wheeled’ out of the studio to various locations to interact with “people on the street.”

Over a two-week period, students designed and built each one of the following named MUELS at full scale:

- Captured View Finder - selected visual experience
- Urban Pin-hole Camera - indirect visual experience
- Urban Ear - indirect aural experience
- Urban Veil - distorted visual/aural
- Urban Cactus - tactile/haptic experience
- Shadow Motion Machine - direct visual experience

Once completed the use of the MUELS combined with an observational mapping and questionnaire activity, based upon Project for Public Spaces’ “Place Performance Evaluation Game (PPS, 2005),” to gather information and then test-out the differences between passive and then activated city spaces.

Students spent one morning mapping activities and movement patterns in empty spaces within the study area, while also interviewing members of the public. The following day, with the MUELS transported to the same

locations as the previous day's observations, they experimented with what happens when you place a new object designed to elicit reactions from passersby into the formerly empty spaces.

Students were asked to consider:

- How does that object or series of objects define and change the nature of the space around it?
- Can it change perceptions and make people, even unwittingly, more aware of their urban surroundings – to notice a view, to pause and interact visually, verbally or kinaesthetically?

Architecture and vis-com students completed this activity together. The "Capture View Finder" for example, shown in Fig. 4 below, took the form of a simple "phone box" shape that allowed a choice of views to be opened up from inside. In different locations the aim was to encourage people to stop and enter, choosing a view that they most often walked past without paying much attention.

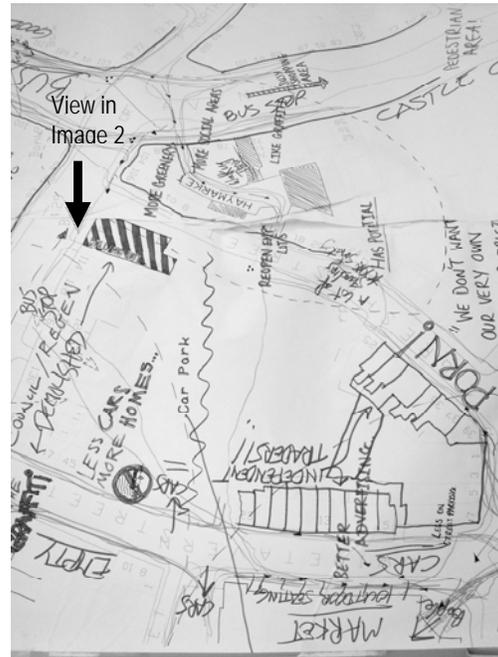
Fig. 4: A MUEL in Belfast. (Author)



The student groups documented all activities with film and photography, as well as gathering all the feedback and mapping data onto a single large format map of the

area (Fig. 5) to be used to communicate their findings back to the public and local groups.

Fig. 5: Students' mapping data (Author)



Workshop and Exhibition:

For the final stage, students worked in one of the 'empty' spaces, using the example of the Architecture Foundation's Road Shows, which temporarily transformed derelict spaces into something more positive. Working with local business owners, empty shop units were 'loaned' to the students in an open-air precinct called the Haymarket Arcade. Students and staff cleaned up the empty units and, over four days, transformed them into an exhibition of artefacts and graphics (including the large-scale mapping studies, documentary film and slide shows, visioning models and sculptures, graphic booklets and posters showing information about the area, created by vis-com students). Access to the units was provided in return for the project work to improve the outlook of empty spaces. All artefacts installed were allowed to remain in-situ as long as the units were unoccupied for commercial use.

Students and staff then organised a workshop within the study area, in a former industrial space used by an artists' collective. A public opening event followed for the exhibition, as an opportunity to share their findings and

visions with each other and members from local business community, the public and government.

During the workshop, staff and students introduced the project, presented the results of their studies, invited guest comments on the area's development proposals and participated in an informal discussion on the theme of "What's wrong with this place?" The discussion raised challenges to all involved with the area's future to make positive changes based on the lessons of what has been done poorly in the past.

As a finale, the opening evening event held for the public exhibition in the open space of the Arcade, provided students with a goal for their work as well as an opportunity to gather feedback. The event was publicised with flyers, a press release and projected slideshows onto derelict buildings nearby. As a centrepiece the students installed their MUELS and incorporated one into an illuminated central "social hub". A few local traders took part and used the event as an opportunity for impromptu discussions of their own in the exhibition spaces (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Haymarket empty. Transformed unit, an impromptu meeting place. (Author)



Evaluation

How do we know if the project was successful?

Both the workshop and exhibition event allowed structured qualitative feedback questionnaires to be distributed to participants and visitors (collection was at anonymous drop points). The events were kept very informal. Unlike more traditional 'town-hall' type formats these methods allowed for verbal and written feedback to be gathered from locals, fellow academics and professionals who may not otherwise take part in formal workshops or interviews.

Architecture and design, however, unlike say mathematics, presents more difficulty in the short-term evaluation of pedagogic research. It is not usually possible to ask a single question or complete an equation to conclude whether or not the methodology used has a better or worse influence on the outcome, in this case the students' learning and skills development. For architecture especially, this evaluation can be a cumulative process over projects, semesters or years.

Pedagogic lessons

Reviewing with the qualitative feedback from surveys returned, the initial analysis shows students had a more positive reaction to projects where abstract concepts combined with experiential activities. This contrasts with feedback from faculty, including the author's early presumption that the abstract readings and paper projects – with their freedom and poetic nature – would be seen as a more 'fun' and valuable tool. The implication for future studio situations is to avoid teaching of abstract concepts in isolation from concrete projects although the balance requires further research.

Some broader observations include:

- For more abstract ideas sessions, peer-led small group formats, rather than tutor-led discussions only, benefited the depth of ideas exchanged.
- Active methods were logistically trickier to organise, especially in 'empty commercial spaces'. Stakeholder, landlord and local authority timescales did not always fit in well with semester format or class-time schedules of students and staff.
- Outdoor activities were weather dependent and required flexible planning in short-term intervals.
- With planned activities, especially outside the classroom, an explicit end goal, like the exhibition, was necessary to keep students engaged.

Anecdotal Feedback

An alternate evaluation of the project came from speaking with participants and students during the events themselves.

For students in the workshop for example, trying to elicit discussion as a group resulted in little interaction. However, when one student was asked to speak about an image of their intervention projected onto a screen (to tell the story behind it), they were able to speak about their apprehension going into the area, the observations they made, the people they spoke to and the ideas that resulted in their site-specific temporary sculpture.

"I went through the quarter – it was terrible... barbed wire, padlocks, broken windows...I was terrified, but then I met John, he told me stories about the 'good old days' of Smithfield." Vis-Com student.

An architecture student's work, back in the studio, showed evidence of a clear impact. Having resisted the abstract activities from the beginning and struggled in studio to produce more than shallow graphic project responses, the student was asked instead to produce a documentary film of his understanding of the site, with some Vis-com input. The result was a poignant mix of observation, graphics, interviews and music, edited to capture a much deeper connection with the area's character and people. This particular student's design work and participation in studio underwent significant improvement. The interpretive film was also awarded a student prize at the 2010 All-Ireland Symposium on the Built Environment, held in Belfast.

The assessments from stakeholders, local authority and members of the public who took part is ongoing and the partnerships formed have provided a good foundation to continue this research and work outside of the University in the future. A local government representative gave the following feedback of the work together so far:

"[The project] provided a concrete connection between the businesses in the area and your students which I feel will be far reaching and sustainable..."

Anecdotal reactions from the public may, for now, be best summed up by this comment from a local resident:

"They were talking about it down the pub."

Conclusion: The Urban Narrative

A key feature of student engagement 'with this place' through this particular pedagogic framework was how the students seemed to become aware of the narrative(s) associated with the urban environment. For many, these may not have been apparent from a traditional studio approach.

In the case of visual communication or architecture, narrative may come directly from people's stories or equally from existing or "lost" buildings and other history, from existing graphics, typography or graffiti; all give clues to less obvious cultural character or any 'territorial' issues. During the visual and verbal documentation, and through on-site design experiments, students reported on the 'folklore' they gathered; shared memories, which they noted as contributed to their sense of *place* as much activity and physical space. This awareness could contribute to a more holistic and humane design sensibility. Narrative, therefore, or the qualitative value of urban storytelling may be the more important output from the pedagogic framework.

The acknowledgment of the narratives can also be interpreted as a validation of the teaching methodology's aim to elicit and evaluate higher levels of critical thinking on the "social life of urban spaces" and fostering skills for understanding from within rather than as an outsider. As a test case for good practice in social engagement, the method of using experiential activities to informally engage with "everyday lives" and learn from everyday activities does appear to help students get beyond preconceived ideas and find out "what's the story" about real issues. As Bartholomew and Locher conclude from their own separate pedagogic research (2007:2): "Narratives provide structure for understanding how the world operates."

Since the project's completion there has been new interest in collaboration from UU's MA course in Public Art, suggesting wider interdisciplinary lessons are possible. Longer-term studies of the current tools and pedagogic approach are still required, with additional research and interpretation needed from further qualitative and quantitative data. In the meantime, from this pilot, the anecdotal evidence suggests the process of engaging students is worth additional investigation. It remains to be seen if the value of the pedagogic framework extends beyond this small study to improve long-term skills for communication with people of the city and, by doing so in practice, helping shape more quality social *places* for people in our cities.

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