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Learning from Empty Space:  
A case study of inter-disciplinary experiential design pedagogy and urban investigation in Belfast

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This paper describes a joint research project between students and staff of architecture and graphic design that explores whether collaborative, field-based approaches to urban design can improve the connection between theory and practice as currently taught to future design professionals. Through a series of field-based interdisciplinary teaching and learning activities, the research examines ways to share skills that help designers engage, physically and socially, within urban contexts outside of their studio environments; interacting with the people who live and work in a neglected urban area of Belfast.

The paper argues, from the critical theory and literature, that narrative, or “urban storytelling” plays an important role in developing an appropriate methodology for balancing professional and local knowledge toward the production of urban space (Bartholomew & Locher 2007; Blundell Jones, Petrescu and Till 2005). Storytelling is interpreted as a way to encourage an inclusive consideration of the symbolic and physical issues affecting the social life of urban spaces (Whyte 1980); skills that help designers build understanding from within rather than as an outsider (Hollis, 2003). The paper discusses the implications of this framework for design practice and pedagogy.

Through evidence from photographic and video documentation of selected events, triangulated through participant observation, qualitative evaluative feedback, and surveys this paper discusses the lessons for improving methods to engage students, and by extension professional designers, to participate with their wider community and the built environment, and to develop an improved ability to think critically (Atherton 2009). The paper concludes with lessons for better connecting theory, practice and the skills capacity of designers, and laypeople to collaboratively develop place-driven visions prior to any attempts at imposing “expert” design solutions on existing urban communities.