Proceedings

Designing Place
International Urban Design Conference

The University of Nottingham
Urban Design Research Group

Department of Architecture and Built Environment
Faculty of Engineering

2-3 April 2012, Nottingham, UK
**Designing Place**

Katharina Borsi [Katharina.Borsi@nottingham.ac.uk]

Sent: Sunday, October 09, 2011 8:05 PM  
To: Saul Golden [S.Golden@ulster.ac.uk]

Dear Colleague,

We have selected the proposals for the Designing Place conference. We were fortunate to receive more than 120 abstracts. We hereby wish to notify you that your proposal has been accepted. We will write to you shortly about submission dates and registration details.

Please be aware that the conference date has been moved to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} & 3\textsuperscript{rd} April 2012. I very much hope that the new dates are suitable to you.

I look forward to meeting you in Nottingham next April.

Sincerely,

Katharina Borsi

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Urban Research Belfast-Lessons from Empty Space
Inter-disciplinary Tools for Urban Enquiry and Place Investigation

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Abstract

This paper describes an inter-disciplinary project, Urban Research Belfast, which combines architecture and graphic design for pedagogic research and experiential urban design analysis in Belfast’s neglected urban edges. The paper first addresses an identified lack of effective collaborative skills amongst UK built-environment professionals, through supporting literature and precedents, and examines shared concepts of (dis)orientation and place-based storytelling as critical teaching and learning approaches to urban design.

The paper then focuses on the development of an original shared pedagogic framework called T.A.L.K. (Teaching, Action, Learning and Knowledge), and the evaluation of a collaborative tool for urban design investigation, M.E.U.L (Machines for Experiential Urban Learning). MEUL adapts W.H. Whyte’s urbanist notion of triangulation as narrative-led experiments and events in ‘empty’ spaces to engage members of the public and local institutions in observations or conversations about these areas and the wider city. The research draws lessons about the potential of these local approaches to help designers investigate, reveal and reflect on more implicit place qualities and historical or cultural aspects of urban spaces. The paper then discusses the project’s relevance to improving the confidence and skills capacity of future designers to engage with professionals, communities, and policymakers.

The paper concludes that tools like MEUL, which focus on socio-cultural narrative and open-ended ‘storytelling’ processes over discipline-specific solutions, play an important role in helping elicit higher levels of critical thinking in early-stage urban design processes, and promoting greater understanding from within rather than as an outsider. The research suggests the pedagogic lessons on creative collaboration are transferable to broader debates about place in architecture, planning and allied design disciplines; toward a more relevant, critical, and spatial place-making praxis that aspires to greater empathy with local needs and vision in urban design without necessarily sacrificing individual creative skills.

Background

Over the last twenty years, there have been growing aspirations in the UK for quality in new urban development and regeneration initiatives. Since the beginning of the global economic recession in 2008, quality and sustainability standards have been under threat despite the UK Government’s continued ‘focus on place making rather than simply house building – with [place-making’s] greater emphasis upon the provision of social and physical infrastructure.’

At the same time, Government regeneration policy continues to shift toward more private sector initiatives to deliver local infrastructure, services and development while emphasising greater creative collaboration between private and third sector organisations, with local public institutions. This is matched by rhetoric about working beyond disciplinary,
professional and institutional silos, and about engaging local people at the earliest stages of development consideration affecting the public realm.

Given the increasing reference to greater quality, participation, and better places for people in policy, design reports and planning guidance however, the research in this paper stems from continuing concerns about a skills gap in 'design and quality of place [and] a need to develop more cross-cutting skills among all professionals in the sector and for all professionals to have a better holistic [rather than specialist] knowledge of place making and their role in delivering it.' The perceived skills gap continues to question the level of effective practice across built-environment professions, government institutions and within local communities to deliver better quality environments. One of the suggested causes of this lack of effective integration is a lack of adequate preparation for contemporary professional life traced back to professional education systems.

Addressing this problematic connection between inter-disciplinary academic theory, teaching and skills for design professionals working in the built environment, this paper presents a joint pedagogic and practice-based project, Urban Research Belfast (URB). URB involved staff and undergraduate students of architecture and graphic design (visual communications), at the University of Ulster in Belfast from 2009-2011, developing shared aspects of architecture and graphic design into a structured, field-based pedagogic framework. A series of teaching and learning activities brought both sets of students together outside of traditional studio to examine one neglected part of the Belfast city centre that has a legacy of 'empty space' – vacant buildings, building sites and surface car parks. In these neglected physical contexts URB explored shared challenges for all urban design professionals, and questioned whether alternative-teaching methods might help build more 'real life' skills, and address the need for professionals with sufficient ability to effectively deal with issues of planning, design and developing of sustainable communities.

By documenting and discussing the project’s framework and outcomes, this research aims at drawing transferable lessons to improve the education and skills capacity of future design professionals for working with local people within these neglected urban areas. In the conceptual context of recent discourse and research on inter-disciplinary design practice, architecture and graphic design are used as examples to address broader challenges and opportunities for developing more effective collaborative skills across urban design and built-environment professions, beginning with changing approaches to early career education.
Project Context: Belfast

The project’s context is an area adjacent to the UU campus in Belfast, called Smithfield and Union, which has existed in the shadow of the City’s central business/retail district and a large 1980s-era internalised retail mall, for over thirty years. Smithfield and Union suffers from ongoing loss of its Victorian streetscape, which ironically remained intact during the thirty years of Northern Ireland’s Troubles. What remains is poor quality public spaces and empty space around isolated pockets of quality Victorian cityscape (Figure 1) and a perception among local businesses, independent traders and residents that planners and policy makers lack a coordinated approach to develop the area as part of holistic city-wide, public-space and place-led process.\textsuperscript{vi}

*Figure 1 Existing Smithfield & Union Context – Victorian buildings and empty space (the authors 2009)*

Empty space, in the URB project, refers to all the vacated, underused, overlooked and contested areas that can be found in cities – not just those in this study’s context – and provide an opportunity to (re)connect with debates about development and the wider city. Empty spaces have been referred to in different guises; as the ubiquitous ‘lost space’ of post-war anti-urban US, UK and European development\textsuperscript{viii}, as more potential-laden and poetic ‘terrain vagues’\textsuperscript{ix}, and as sinister ‘shadowed spaces’\textsuperscript{x}. In more traditional market-led development these spaces are often referred to in monetary terms as private investment values and potential returns on investment\textsuperscript{xi}. The latter approach can mistakenly overlook the latent qualities of empty space as irrelevant to future consideration. URB’s focus on early
career education aims to encourage future professionals to take a deeper perspective than is traditionally provided by studio-based design pedagogy.

**Background: Interdisciplinary Practice and Education**

The background issues for *Urban Research Belfast* cross between art and the built environment and focuses on the role of studio-based teaching in helping or hindering the development of more critical, collaborative design professionals. The following review examines a range of sources relevant to the project that address general pedagogic debates and professional design education in architecture and related fields.

Studio environments have been praised as an "exemplar" of reflective education and practice, and criticised as a 'hothouse' where students, too often, rely primarily on the instruction of successive tutors rather than develop their own critical judgement. In an era of more student-centred pedagogy, developing since the 1960s and part of UK policy since the late 1990s, a number of sources challenge autonomous studio-centred approaches to design education as relying too much on variations of paper projects over more engagement with 'real life', and argue for more active learning across built environment disciplines.

Traditional studio-based design education, Morrow argues, favours “easier [or] safer” design contexts that are “invariably beautiful, ‘full of [obvious] character’ and have strict limits.” Morrow contends that students who work in safe contexts “may never develop the skills needed to deal with large, expansive sites with little [obvious] character” and that they ‘should have the opportunity at least once during their studies to design sites that take into account the needs of marginalised groups in society.” In the context of architecture and graphic design education, *URB* emphasizes the need to supplement traditional design skills with ways for future professionals to grapple with less obvious urban conditions and with the ‘other’; other people, disciplines, and ways of critical learning and practice. These are particular tools that would be valuable for work in a variety of disciplines but in this project are applied to developing a more critical urban design capacity. Many of these skills may be different from those required for designers working in isolated greenfield locations or exclusively inward-focused private projects, but in the *URB* project are regarded as equally important for future professionals working in the public realm.

Despite calls for greater professional and pedagogic integration in the 1990s the issues of inter-disciplinary practice and education remain, as Chapman argues: ‘disciplinary silos still seem common [and that] it is not easy to see real interdependence and synergy in the design and delivery of more unified professional education programmes.’ Steel and Macmillan note that there is also a lack of design research which has addressed the added
complications that arise from interdisciplinary team work. From UK-based research in the
1990s however, Wood identifies examples of interdisciplinary pedagogy in action and claims
that a ‘crucial aspect [of success] is the place and value of common studies [and] reflective
observation as a critical activity that must form part of any project work.’ Wood also cites a
particularly ‘British phenomenon’ of post-war specialist vocational training at undergraduate
levels versus a more general education prevalent in the US which, along with the UK’s
professional accreditation systems, local University staff attitudes and power considerations
form barriers to change in the UK.

Taking in the above research, and further considering issues for collaboration beyond the
studio for **URB**, a number of UK-based precedent studies since 2000 were identified in UK-
wide literature and from exploratory visits to existing programmes in England. These reflect
a range of efforts to strengthen connections between built environment courses and wider
communities, to involve live projects, and to collaborate across disciplines in
academia. These precedents reflect **URB**’s research aims although they differed by often
dealing with only a single discipline, involving graduate level students primarily or connecting
different disciplines but not necessarily working jointly on projects – either at the same time
or with shared outcomes. Interviews carried out during exploratory visits did support Wood’s
conclusion that reflective observation can be more important than short-term project output
as a means to structure and evaluate these type of projects at undergraduate level.

These sources support **URB**’s pedagogic approach for students (future professionals) to
develop real life design skills from a wider context of knowledge, opinions and non-physical
or qualitative factors affecting urban development (Figure 2). **Urban Research Belfast** is
framed therefore, in specific design teaching and practice issues as well as a wider context
of critical literature on changes throughout higher education and contemporary debates
about urban design practice; emphasizing more student-led, cross-disciplinary and
collaborative approaches in education with the aim of influencing more transformative,
collaborative, and critical approaches to professional design practice. By working in the
rapidly changing context surrounding University of Ulster’s Belfast campus, the project
responds to specific real concerns outside the University, and strategies for teaching and
learning inside.
Interdisciplinary Design Education and Research: Architecture and Graphic Design

Looking closer at architecture and graphic design in the UK, collaboration in practice appears to be more prevalent than in earlier stages of professional education, for a variety of factors related to changes in UK architecture education. Some of these factors support the previous critical findings of Wood’s research in England, and others to changes in faculty structures that align architecture more closely with Built Environment disciplines, and away from the Arts and Humanities departments in which graphic design is situated. At UU, both departments are within the Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment and are pedagogically structured to produce commercial-ready graduates with close-ties to their respective external professional bodies. As this research project shows however, urban design provides opportunities for greater inter-working between the two disciplines as a more integral part of professional education.

Apart from links in practice, architects and graphic designers’ increasingly use common methods of communicating and exploring design – from traditional drawing, sketching and small-scale model building to photography, film and multimedia production as well as a the upsurge in accessible digital applications that seamlessly support design, visualisation and production. Both disciplines also share debates about the contested notions of place-making, as phenomenological design ideals or practical means of development process and procurement. While architecture deals predominantly with three dimensional and spatial form, and graphic design is more traditionally concerned with two-dimensional art and typography, graphic design can extend to spatial interventions and visual artefacts as much
as architecture can incorporate graphics beyond applied surface devices, integrating them into a building’s tectonic fabric. Furthermore, two-dimensional graphic design applications, as environmental or visual communications, also play an integral role, with architecture and landscape and product design, in wayfinding success and failure – for buildings and urban environments.

In terms of design research, there are also some notable precedents for architects and graphic designers working together in academia. Venturi and Scott-Brown’s *Learning from Las Vegas*, for example, resulted from a semester-long pedagogic project at Yale in 1968 between instructors and graduate students of architecture, planning and graphic design. While the project is known more as a morphological study of urban space and form than as a pedagogic collaboration, Venturi and Scott-Brown explicitly credit these intentions and set out a clear underlying intent to challenge traditional studio pedagogy and develop new tools from shared investigations. Urban Research Belfast takes inspiration from this latter aspect in its focused look at collaborative teaching and learning between architecture and graphic design, and the relationship between graphics, built-form and urban place (Figure 3). Urban design in this project is the overlapping area of study for both sets of students to try and discern the place qualities of the *Smithfield and Union* study area to underpin separate processes of design, while working together to develop core exploratory skills.

![Figure 3. Smithfield & Union urban form, architecture and graphics reinforcing a sense of placelessness. (the authors 2010)](image-url)
Project Framework: Storytelling and Exploring

The challenge, taken on in URB, was to find, or create, a framework or mechanism to bring theory together with practical and transferrable methods of teaching, learning and practice for architecture and graphic design. The project developed as an opportunity for a more formal investigation of critical pedagogic theory and inter-disciplinary practice, focusing on shared debates about (re)balancing priorities between theory and practice, and ways to enhance skills capacities across architecture, graphic design and related professional fields dealing with the built environment.

During the project’s initial phases a flexible yet ordered, and design-led, pedagogic framework was developed as T.A.L.K. (Teaching, Action, Learning and Knowledge), shown in Table 1. The concepts underpinning TALK derive from traditional studio Design projects and from investigative architecture and graphic design strategies, combined with broader critical teaching and learning theory. Working collaboratively and creatively within this framework, TALK employs a series of structured and open-ended activities to shift away from a reliance on a one-way transmission of knowledge and individual Design scenarios, toward more collective working, experiential activities and experiments that are meant to encourage reflection and eventually independent application of abstract ideas in practice.

| Teaching | Abstract Theory | Place-based Storytelling | Experiential Activities |
| Action | Individual | Collective |
| Learning | Words & Images | Concrete Experiments |
| Knowledge | ‘How’ & ‘That’ | Questioning and Exploring | Reflection & Application |

In the framework, the concept of Place-Based Storytelling is drawn from literature of both architecture and graphic design. It refers to developing a deeper ‘urban narrative’ by means that aim to help elicit higher levels of critical thinking on socio-spatial aspects of a
local environment, from within rather than as an outsider, and to discourage relying on preconceived knowledge. Applied as a method, storytelling is meant to encourage an inclusive consideration of the symbolic and physical issues affecting urban spaces, balancing professional and local knowledge, without necessarily sacrificing designers’ creative skills.

Similarly, Exploring is a concept that could apply to many disciplines, but through URB is interpreted as involving either a deliberate course of action, path and end-goal, or a less structured – perhaps random – decision-making process, which does not necessarily require a predetermined end-point or outcome for success. Interpreting this through the literature of architecture and graphic design, one finds overlaps regarding urban design and urban experience – differing but relevant interpretations that reflect contrasting connotations of exploring urban environments in terms of becoming (dis)orientated or getting “lost”. There is, for example, the well-know link between “disorientation” and potential disaster from architect, urbanist and city planner Kevin Lynch in his influential book, The Image of the City.

Lynch’s principles for urban design and city form developed to address the spatial causes of this perceived disaster. These principles are subject to wide ranging research, beyond the scope of this current analysis, but the concept of disorientation is relevant to the URB project’s early stage design investigation, prior to form-making, where ‘getting lost’ can be a positive experience as contemporary graphic designer Ruedi Baur argues:

‘Moving somewhere else not from obligation but for pleasure choosing to venture into unknown lands or cultures, enjoying no longer being able to understand the connections between the various things in front of you...Introducing new facts that call everything into question, and enable you to shake off old beliefs, add one complexity to another, blur distinctions, delve into chaos not to bring in any order but to enjoy getting beyond simplistic models. Learning to get lost so as ultimately to work out your way better and choosing to approach disorientation as a realm of possibility rather than only the “overtones of utter disaster” described by Kevin Lynch.’

Exploring, interpreted through Baur in the TALK framework, is meant as a way of moving students away from their individual learning comfort zones, but not aiming to get them completely lost. For urban design analysis, disorientation is interpreted as a way to get to know the city in different ways, as much as possible through considered and unexpected encounters that requiring more than detached observation to find the subtler ‘nature of things’. Image and form may follow, but evaluating design output was not the main focus
of the project research. Instead the research focuses on the students’ process of working toward a more iterative layering of explicit and implicit design information, on building confidence to engage with unfamiliar people and issues of design in urban spaces, and to support the transfer of these skills into their ongoing education, and future careers.

Toward these ends, URB was structured over three steps, with students working together in two-week intervals between periods focused within their own disciplines during the academic year, beginning with ice-breaking activities and more traditional theory readings, moving next to more interactive small-group based urban studies and discussions on language, theory and practice (Figure 4)xxxvi, then the core independent student-led field-work projects, before completing the year with reflective workshops and feedback sessions. In each stage, Design and aesthetic considerations remained of value in the feedback on students’ investigations, but the priority was on students’ awareness and exploratory design skills in the early stages of their undergraduate education.

![Figure 4. Joint reading and theory mapping activity. (the authors 2010)](image)

**MEUL: Machines for Experiential Urban Learning**

For the field-based stage, which is the main project outcome and research focus, the mechanism eventually developed to combine the aims of the TALK framework was the M.E.U.L. or *Machines for Experiential Urban Learning*. MEUL draws upon experiential pedagogy and action-based art and design practices. In practice it is a series of non-invasive artefacts, installations, or events that are intended neither as a pure graphic nor as an architectural solution. Conceptually, MEUL builds upon William H. Whyte’s urbanist theory of
**triangulation**, whereby 'some external object provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as though they were not'. xxxvii

From a local, practical example in Belfast, this type of interaction occurs spatially and socially in the *everyday* place-specific activity of *Belfast Telegraph* newspaper sellers, who roll their carts out at the same time each day and ‘take over’ open areas at corners, bus-stops, passageways, etc in order to engage as much as possible with passers-by to sell their stock (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. MEUL and everyday triangulation. (the authors 2010)](image1.png)

Initial pilot studies drew inspiration from this local activity in the form of architectural objects that were also rolled out by students to take over empty spaces to allow students to start conversations about design and the city, and to gather information from strangers without resorting to the stopping people with clipboards and survey questions – something that students and the passers-by are usually more reluctant to engage with in public. xxxviii

In Whyte’s observations however, *triangulation* does always not rely on something physical, but may also be a phenomenological, shared experience of an event, a performance, or a ‘spectacular view’ or perhaps more subversive activities - like recent *Occupy* movements in cities around the world. In Belfast, this type of informal triangulation activity takes place in charged political events and cultural exchanges or festivals throughout the year (Figure 6).
From these concepts and pilot studies, the *Machines for Experiential Urban Learning*, as finally developed therefore, combines a series of short-term mapping and student-led experiments that together aim to challenge or simply bring to the surface aspects of selected empty spaces in an open-ended process that goes beyond the ‘survey with clipboards’ approach. This strategy maintains an every-day, art-based informality with links to more quantitative research, like Hillier’s *Space Syntax*, which use computer-assisted methods to study urban patterns, space and the ‘social organisation of everyday life—physical configurations of forms and elements.’ Where, for Hillier, *space is the machine* however, the MEULs interpreted the machine as a network of elements that includes the interaction of students, the people of the city and place-qualities of the empty spaces themselves.

As an interdisciplinary approach to urban design and storytelling therefore, the *Machines for Experiential Urban Learning* combine teaching and learning about place-branding and place-making, with shared lessons on typography, wayfinding, spatial experience, architecture and local history and culture. Students collaboratively work to develop their temporary *machines* as a means to ‘reveal’ a chosen location, highlight specific characteristics relevant to the wider urban and social-economic context and promote ‘conversations with strangers’ that could combine quantitative and qualitative data gathering with more tacit information on local activity and patterns of use. The only constraints were health and safety considerations, and a requirement to set-up, document and remove each ‘intervention’ in *Smithfield and Union* over a single day.
Site specific responses ranged from taking over disused bus-stops for children’s play areas, provocative installation on busy street corners, footpaths, car park spaces, vacant lots, crossing islands and other vacant, overlooked spaces – challenging prevailing spatial and political patterns and using graphics and small-scale recycled products to provide places to enhance existing opportunities to sit, seek shelter and socialise (Figure 7). Staff acted only as observers, documenting students in conversations with members of the public, with local professionals, local organisations, businesses and even engaging with the local police.

Students also led a public workshop, set up an exhibition in vacant storefronts and created posters as a means of communicating their own process and findings. More ephemeral interventions included projecting text to derelict building facades, to highlight their ‘faults’ in a particularly striking symbiotic way – a call to find “Beauty in the Broken” (Figure 8).
Conclusions and Researcher’s Reflection on Narrative

This project, like design education, is not a linear, single point of evaluation; longer-term implications will be a cumulative process over semesters or years. As noted previously, this current stage of analysis focused more on the ways in which students were able to reflect on the process of jointly addressing an area of common concern, not an assessment of the Design quality of their interventions. Data was gathered during discipline-specific projects, through follow-up student publications, and workshops where anonymous surveys and interviews provided qualitative feedback. These were related to anecdotal and observed evidence gathered during the project stages. The analysis is ongoing to provide a range of information for curriculum development and future project design or research but some preliminary findings are discussed below.

A key feature of student engagement ‘with place’ that emerged through this particular framework, from the feedback, was that the explicit focus on a greater awareness of narrative(s) associated with the urban environment may not have been as apparent from a traditional studio approach. In the case of visual communication or architecture, narratives came from less obvious, more complex, networks of information - directly from people’s stories or equally from existing or “lost” buildings and other history, from existing graphics, typography or graffiti; all gave 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; memories, which they noted as contributing to their sense of place as much as activity and physical space (Figure 9).

While the two discipline groups were principally at similar Further Higher Education Qualification levels, the Vis-Com students had a more diffuse range of Foundation year experiences and less confidence in their subject focus. They expressed more uncertainty in the structured survey regarding the outcome of the MEUL exercise. This was moderated by their experience of the reflective opportunities offered by the poster design. Their reactions suggest a need for ‘controlled interdisciplinarity’ and that students’ grounding in their own particular practice area is not necessarily a negative starting point, but may even enhance the overall ability to confidently engage effectively in dialogue with other disciplines.

Transferability and Future Research

The acknowledgment of narratives by students is a validation of the pedagogic aim to elicit and evaluate higher levels of critical thinking and critical skills for urban design. As Bartholomew and Locher conclude from their own pedagogic research: “Narratives provide structure for understanding how the world operates.” This awareness could contribute to a more holistic and humane design sensibility identified as ‘local tendencies in Graphic design’, or as arguments for greater engagement with local communities, and ‘Transformative Agency’ in Architecture. From the URB experience, this does not mean that greater engagement requires an exclusion of individual design or creative ingenuity however. Further research is required about whether this awareness translates into
professional action or acts as a counterbalance to the idea of local identity becoming ‘reduced, simplified, and, in some respects, made obsolete by the reach of global marketing’.\textsuperscript{xlv}

The method of using experiential activities to informally engage with “everyday lives” and learn from everyday activities does appear therefore, to provide a suitable test case for good practice in social engagement, to help students get beyond preconceived ideas and find out ‘what’s the story’— even if their responses don’t necessarily support popular opinion or aim at achieving a consensus, including within their individual student groups. An appreciation of narrative or the qualitative value of urban storytelling may be the more important output from the project framework.

**Anecdotal Evidence from Outside of Academia**

An alternate evaluation of the project that requires further systematic analysis comes from anecdotal evidence, speaking with participants during the events themselves. 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...”

The following local resident comments may for now, best sum up the public reactions:

> ‘you wouldn’t really think of looking you just walk along. You don’t look at things. But when you open up the thing you start to notice things which I wouldn’t be thinking of doing, you know what I mean just walk on oblivious.’

> ‘y’know your looking out at something you’re just seeing different wee things.’

> ‘They were talking about it down the pub.’

**Conclusion**

The anecdotal evidence suggests that students have emerged from the experience with a deeper appreciation of, and confidence in dealing with ‘unpredictability, stress, openness, multiple contending voices — conditions characteristic of supercomplexity’.\textsuperscript{xlv} While this project concerned the specificity of place and design, for future research and practice considerations, the lessons learned also have wider implications for ways to better support students preparing for supercomplexity in contemporary life and professional practice. How these skills develop during the remainder of students’ education and if the learning continues...
beyond into their varying professional disciplines remains to be seen through the results of their future practice and further research.

As short term experiments in urban design and education however, the collaborative MEULs often resulted in poignant and beautiful observations about the notion of place that move beyond the immediate neglected surface perceptions about existing urban areas. In the context of this project and Smithfield & Union, this represents a successful start at exploring the lesser celebrated people, spaces, history and culture of the area that once formed the heart of Belfast. As a broader lesson, it suggests ways to engage design students in building stronger skills to address unfamiliar contexts anywhere, and to work with others to improve possibilities for quality and design aspirations; possibly even finding new relevance and inspiration in the overlooked and everyday.

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vi The URB project was part-funded by the University of Ulster’s Centre for Higher Education Practice (CHEP), with support from PLACE (the Architecture and Built Environment Centre for Northern Ireland). See http://www.ulster.ac.uk/centrehep and see www.placeni.org. The authors would also like to acknowledge the input from colleagues and peers to adapt this paper from the preliminary findings issued as part of the final funding report for the University of Ulster’s Centre for Higher Education Practice, the CHEP 2nd Festival of Innovative Practice and from a paper delivered to the 2012 All-Ireland Architecture Research Group Inaugural Conference.

vii The study area has been the subject of several masterplans carried out by the Northern Ireland Department of Social Development (2005, 2009) and Belfast City Council (2009). It has been referred to as the North West Quarter [NWQ], Northside Urban Village and Smithfield Market and Library Quarter before an official rebranding in 2010 as Smithfield and Union DSDNI, Belfast City Centre: Northside Urban Village Regeneration Implementation Plan 2009-2012. May, 2009. http://www.smithfieldandunion.com/map.html


xiii The broader changes in education relevant to this paper are interpreted within the continuing shift away from what Paulo Freire termed the ‘student-teacher contradiction’, in which teachers - as


J Till, Dean of the School of Architecture and the Built Environment, University of Westminster 2010, interviewed by the author 18 November 2010, regarding Professor Till’s live project experiences and pedagogic research, carried at University of Sheffield from 1999-2008.


Hollis cited in S Davoudi and I Strange, Conceptions of Space and Place in Strategic Spatial Planning, 2008, p. 16.


‘But let the mishap of disorientation once occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being. The very word ‘lost’ in our language means much more than simple geographical uncertainty; it carries overtones of utter disaster.’ K Lynch, The Image of the City, MIT Press, 1960.

From Louis I Kahn’s words: “The work of students should not be directed to the solution of problems, but rather to sensing the nature of a thing. But you cannot know a nature without getting it out of your guts. You must *sense* what it is, and then you can look up what other people think it is ” In J Lobell, *Between Silence and Light*, 1979, p.12.


A specific proprietary tool used to help students map each location and gather quantitative or qualitative data was the *Place Game*, used with permission from Fred Kent and Project for Public Spaces, Ltd, (PPS) New York. PPS, building on WH Whyte’s urban research since the 1970s, developed Place Game as a survey and mapping tools for professionals, local authority and community representatives to analyse and document local activity and patterns of use in defined urban areas. S Golden took part in the PPS, Ltd, training event, "How to Turn A Place Around" in New York, April 2009, learning to implement this tool. See PPS Ltd’s *Place Game*, PPS 2005, and http://www.pps.org/. The pilot objects were called MUELs (Mobile Urban Experience Laboratories). See S Golden, *The Pedagogy of Place: A Practical Approach to Urban Design Lessons Beyond the Studio*, Conference Paper, 2010. Feedback on the initial MUELs suggested that the focus on architectural objects and phenomenological experience excluded more participation and input from the graphic design students. The 2010-2011 phase of URB addressed this with an amended approach.


K Bartholomeew and M Locher, ‘People & Place’, 2007, p.2


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**Biography**

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