

# ARCHITECTURE PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE AND THE URB PROJECT

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*The dichotomy of opinion shows up as two opposing arguments: one in favour of more creative autonomy to pursue formalist design, or one for greater openness to re-engage with society on matters affecting the built environment.*



## Collaboration and Transdisciplinarity.<sup>2</sup>

Why is collaboration an important focus of research into the education of architects and to Urban Research Belfast's interdisciplinary approach to urban design pedagogy? In their core studies of architectural design, history and theory, technology and professional practice, students of architecture are already bombarded by increasingly complex and pluralist theory, ethics and prescriptive dogma. In urban design, the list is again exhaustive, ranging from polemic 'isms' and metaphysical readings, patterns and morphologies to empirical, qualitative and quantifiable (valuable) considerations; economic, social and critical questions such as ecology and sustainability, community, accessibility, gender, culture, race and power.

With the extent of intricate knowledge across the areas of art and design, social and physical sciences and economics that must be considered therefore, it is little surprise that engaging with urban design can be daunting to undergraduates who may have entered schools of architecture knowing only about the art and design aspects of the profession. In many cases these aspects of the broader engagement for architects, especially with inter-disciplinary social concerns, may not even figure in undergraduate architecture courses.<sup>3</sup> The reason for this has been put down to the number of architects who "insist that architecture and its education are about creative acts based on viewing architecture as an art, and only an art, not a social act, not a science, not a technology or even a business."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the social aspects of architecture, because they are seen as 'unglamorous',<sup>5</sup> may be resisted by those who also argue that they are "not an architect's problem, and that the politics of design and building are issues that students will encounter in practice anyway and that is not an architectural education concern."<sup>6</sup>

While not proposing a single solution or synthesis of the debates about collaboration and social responsibility, URB's response is that waiting to introduce these issues in practice is too late. The project's pedagogic approach uses design-led teaching and learning activities in architecture and graphic design specifically, but with regard to all disciplines, argues that approaches to practice skills and values professionals develop can be shaped by early experiences in education to influence more careful consideration of professionals' roles in society, and more openness to true trans-disciplinary collaboration.

For architecture, the concept of collaboration introduced through URB therefore, means more than architects' traditional views of 'co-operation'<sup>7</sup> as the ability to work alongside others or to lead design and construction teams. With the support of literature and practice examples mainly in the UK,<sup>8</sup> the projects in Urban Research Belfast present ways



to question whether creativity and interests in quality of place can coexist with social engagement as explicit concepts of professional architectural practice; whether it is possible for architects to see collaboration as more interdisciplinary and participatory processes within the professional mainstream. This approach not only addresses knowledge and skills gaps identified at UK government levels<sup>9</sup> but incorporates related aspects of incoming European directive requirements for architects' training.<sup>10</sup>

With this international perspective in mind, URB acts through professional education to foster creative skills with greater social responsibility, and inter-disciplinary skills to investigate local qualities of place without expecting a pre-defined project output as a result. This action aims, as the architect, educator and polemicist Jeremy Till writes, "...move from the idea of architect as expert problem solver to that of architect as citizen sense-maker; a move from a reliance on the

<sup>9</sup> HCA, 2007, 2010, 2012. See also: C, 2001; ODPM 2003; Egan 2004; ODPM 2004.

<sup>10</sup> "That training [as an architect...] must maintain a balance between theoretical and practical aspects of architectural training [...] adequate knowledge of urban design planning and the skills involved in the planning process [...] the relations between people and buildings, and between buildings and their environment and of the need to relate buildings to human needs scale [...] the role of the architect in: in particular in preparing briefs that account of social factors;" ED, 2005 DCLG, 2007:58-59.

*"I don't know that architects are saying 'let's collaborate'... but we are dealing now with complexity that requires greater collaboration."*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Griffiths of FAT Architects, cited in Bedell, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Neef, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> 10 out of 41 RIBA validated schools of architecture in the UK teach urban design to undergraduate students. Rogers, 2008. Rogers identified equate interdisciplinary approaches to undergraduate and postgraduate courses relevant urban professions UTF, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ma and Wilkinson, 2007: 250

<sup>5</sup> Li 2000: 119

<sup>6</sup> Ma and Wilkinson, 2007: 250

<sup>7</sup> "The research is seen within national processes and issues architects, designers and existing spaces, the UK focus relates to the specific national and professional context in which the University of Ulster Department of Architecture operates; validated by the Royal Architectural Institute (RAI) and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).

impulsive imaginations of the lone genius to that of a collaborative ethical imagination; from clinging to notions of total control to a relaxed acceptance of letting go”<sup>11</sup>

### **Pedagogy and Urban Design Knowledge: The Studio and The Field**

With URB, the challenge discussed here and in the introduction, was translating the project aims and aspirations into an actionable method to work with first and second year students of architecture and graphic design. How to introduce them to the working together, to the concepts of inter-disciplinarity, and to engage them with the right balance of study of the theory, meanings, language and application of place in local urban contexts. Some of the challenges are those that are found to be common across other disciplines in humanities, social and physical sciences: to bestow intellectual skills that are “transferable to subjects other than those in which we acquired them.”<sup>12</sup>

In the wider context of education, collaborative teaching and learning, and teaching through experiential methods outside of more insular academic environments has been a part of an ongoing shift in approach since the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> The impacts of these changing attitudes has been a move away from what the widely cited critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970) originally termed the “student-teacher contradiction” in which teachers are power/knowledge-holding “subjects” and students are kept at a distance as receptive “patient, listening objects”<sup>14</sup>

Despite this shift however, and the abundance of resources students now have to access information, studies have shown students in higher education to rely more on a “small set of common information”, increasingly digital and rarely from face to face resources other than their subject instructors.<sup>15</sup> With regard to how this blinkering affects students’ attitude toward independent learning, the above research concludes that ‘students conceptualize research, especially tasks associated with seeking information, as a competency learned by rote, rather than as an opportunity to learn, develop, or expand upon an information-gathering strategy.’<sup>16</sup> In architecture similar issues can be seen in studio environments and attitudes toward engaging with information outside of design or studio – analysing briefs and site contexts for example.

For architecture and design, there is an ongoing debate surrounding the value of learning and working that is restricted to studios or desk-based investigations. Studio environments have been praised in the past as an “exemplar” of reflective education and practice with a wide range of teaching and learning opportunities,<sup>17</sup> but they are also criticised as hothouse of artificially supported learning.<sup>18</sup> This criticism focuses

on established power structures in architecture studios and, like the comments above about general education trends, on the limited view of learning whereby students too often rely on the weekly instruction of tutors rather than developing their own independent critical judgement.

For urban investigations, the criticism focuses on the tendency to teach through repeated versions of ‘paper projects’ and assessments prioritising visual and graphic output over a demonstrated engagement with ‘real life’ away from the drawing board.<sup>19</sup>

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This ‘traditional’ approach to studio-based design education favours “easier [or] safer” design contexts that are “invariably beautiful, ‘full of [obvious] character’ and have strict limits.”<sup>20</sup> Morrow contends that students who work in these safe contexts “may never develop the skills needed to deal with large, expansive sites that have little [obvious] character” and ‘should have the opportunity at least once during their studies to design sites that take into account the needs of marginalised groups in society.’<sup>21</sup> Salama and Wilkinson argue also for social aspects of architecture to

become an integral part of studio teaching so they become part of an accepted process of research design:

“The studio setting, tasks, and activities should allow students to conduct research while aiming at developing their abilities to transform social and behavioural information into buildable architectural forms”.<sup>22</sup>

The current problem, which goes back to early discussions about how student’s approach research, is that there is a tendency to see the social and environmental aspects as a tick-box of visiting the site and producing perfunctory mapping exercises. Site visits are not structured sufficiently as a “form of investigation or inquiry [and as] a result students do not realize what to see and what to look for...”<sup>23</sup> This criticism is reflected in a growing observation of students reliance on digital tools such as online maps and on proprietary virtual street tours, which can replace actually walking down a street in different seasons and times of the day, and – in the limits of current technology – do not allow students to use more than their visual observation skills.

Part of the approach through URB, and tools like the Mobile Urban Experience Labs and the Machines for Experiential Urban Learning was a direct focus on the site and the investigation of place and place narratives as the main project outcome. In this way the students could be

<sup>17</sup> Schön, 1985; Boyer and Mitgang, 19; Farren-Bradley, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Till 2005: 3; Stansfield-Smith, 2000; Nicol and Pilling, 2000; Habraken, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Nicol and Pilling, 2000:10, 19; Morrow, 2000:47.

<sup>20</sup> Morrow, 2000: 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Salama and Wilkinson, 2007: 252.

<sup>23</sup> Salama 2006: 65.

introduced to both phenomenological aspects of place, to using all their senses kinaesthetically and haptically, and to directly engaging socially with other aspects of the local context by talking to local people and building users.<sup>24</sup> The teaching and learning activities emphasize 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 skills are regarded as different to those for designers working in Greenfield or exclusively private projects but just as important to future professionals.<sup>25</sup>

The joint aspect of these student-led investigations, as is discussed in later sections of the book, gives students a structured yet open-ended opportunity to share their observational skills, and help each other learn about experiential investigations, physical qualities of typology and typography, and to the search for deeper aspects of the local area through storytelling. It is this latter aspect of engagement and moving students, even if temporarily away from drawing boards and computers, that has inspired URB's T.A.L.K. framework.

### Critically Addressing the City: Belfast and Beyond

Using Belfast as the specific area of analysis, URB uses the TALK framework to concentrate on the kinds of shared skills and knowledge that improve architects general collaborative approach to design but may also help better address existing marginalised parts of cities, where architects are but one of many actors in community-led or private development frameworks. In existing cities like Belfast, there are additional social questions about who has the 'right' to make decisions about planning and design for new development and 'regeneration', and who determines each area's place-meaning,<sup>26</sup> the appropriate infrastructure and form, and the priorities for private and public space.

These questions go beyond the scope of architecture education and this present research with students, but are relevant to the project aims and or wider discussions with students about architects' roles in the planning, design and delivery of these types of more public urban projects (in education or practice). The challenges these practice contexts hold are not new but continue to increase in complexity as the world rapidly becomes more urbanised, there are higher levels of mobility (professional and personal) between geographic locations and cultures, and there is increasingly open conflict over the stratification in society between classes and political authority.<sup>27</sup>

Difference, or the ability to contend with differences becomes an increasingly important skill to learn then, before entering professional practice, to address the above issues. In architecture and urban



design, differences include power differences between the many disciplines, investors and government bodies who set, interpret, fund and implement design initiatives for urban development. There are also important differences in language between these groups that must be addressed. These include definitions of place, place-making and place-shaping,<sup>28</sup> and community versus neighbourhood<sup>29</sup> planning, as well as different qualitative and quantitative means of valuing 'success' in new development and regeneration. The variety of interpretations in just these few areas can lead to divisive approaches to decision-making and implementing urban development projects, especially in more marginalised neighbourhoods where private investment can conflict with public visions or expectations for the future.<sup>30</sup>

In these existing neighbourhoods, the views of non-professionals (local people, community and voluntary organisations, special interest groups and other stakeholders) can be considered with government and private development plans or consulted after designs and detailed proposals are in progress. When working in these situations, the professional roles architects choose can be determined by ethics and commercial factors

<sup>29</sup> In the UK context, Community Planning is a term used extensively in Scottish Planning to refer to systems of planning infrastructure and services ([www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/community-planning](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/community-planning); [www.improvementservice.co.uk/community-planning/](http://www.improvementservice.co.uk/community-planning/)). This is a different usage of the same term in the US that means architectural or spatial 3d-planning with local communities – the usage that adopted by URB and is closer to the term Neighbourhood Planning used by the Royal Institute of Architects (RIBA 2010) and endorsed by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and UK government Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). See also [www.communityplanning.net](http://www.communityplanning.net).

<sup>30</sup> Di Masso et al., 2011; North Belfast 28 April 2012:1-2.

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'; Future Communities, <http://www.futurecommunities.net/why/place-shaping-0>  
November 2011)



as to whether they act as agents for developers and government bodies, or the public itself, or somewhere in between. Most who continue into the professional field may end up in a traditional commercial practice<sup>31</sup> but some may choose more protagonist social roles while others will become

*Looking to the 1950s to 60s, the widening cultural and professional split between the arts and the social sciences in architecture and planning reflected alternative views of Modernism's 'heroic measures'<sup>37</sup> For radically altering cities in the US, UK and Europe these views challenged the belief that "form on its own could determine the quality of social and economic life, not just contribute to it."*

more autonomous designers, to the extent possible.

Additional pressures and influences have arisen in the wake of the global economic recession since 2008, changing investment levels and government policies to deliver or support private delivery of development projects through local partnerships for example. These ongoing shifts, described further in the following sections, challenge both existing professionals and educators

concerned with producing future professional, to determine the most suitable balance of individual creativity and valued skills to work in these complicated arenas.

### From Practice to Pedagogy: Looking Backwards and Forwards

While Belfast was the specific focus of URB's inter-disciplinary investigations, the project also introduced the students to the background of their 'chosen' architecture and graphic design professions in relation to cities and urban design. As noted in the introduction, the project's initial stages incorporated more traditional teaching activities like presentations to students and discussions with them about the general anticipated project lessons. The discussions relevant to this chapter on architecture focused on architects' involvement in urban renewal and regeneration frameworks in the last twenty-five years primarily, set in a longer-term context of debates and disciplinary divisions that have emerged since the early twentieth century.

After initial presentations from staff, to set the historical background about both professions, students were able to openly discuss with each other their own definitions and understanding of their respective professions, gaining each other's separate disciplinary perspective.<sup>32</sup> Some students noted the more glamorous aspects of fame, and fashion

drew them to study architecture; the raised the profile of architecture as a profession in popular culture,<sup>33</sup> high profile iconic buildings and their starchitects, which emerged from the 'boom' of global development since the late 1990s.

The discussions were an opportunity to highlight how, despite the boom of development and apparent high profile of the profession, architects' current roles in larger more diverse construction teams – particularly as designers and team leaders – have been increasingly challenged and sidelined in the UK over the last twenty-five years by economic streamlining and construction-led procurement;<sup>34</sup> shifting the architect's traditional position to more secondary or tertiary roles.<sup>35</sup>

With parallel history and theory courses providing a more general background, the examples used in URB were chosen to place current criticisms of architecture in the context of longer-term. An example of debates over form versus social considerations was taken from the early period when town planning formed as a distinct discipline from architecture. The pioneering planner Patrick Geddes's (1915) warned new civic design and town planning students not to fall into the "too external [aesthetically concerned] and technical discipline that has become the bane of architectural instruction."<sup>36</sup>

Looking to the 1950s to 60s, the widening cultural and professional split between the arts and the social sciences in architecture and planning reflected alternative views of Modernism's 'heroic measures'<sup>37</sup> For radically altering cities in the US, UK and Europe these views challenged the belief that "form on its own could determine the quality of social and economic life, not just contribute to it."<sup>38</sup> There are also the well cited lessons of Kevin Lynch (1961), referred to in the introduction and Jane Jacobs (1961), Gordon Cullen (1962) and others in this period. Without retelling the full history of urbanism, this era was also highlighted to students as the period when questions about Modernist approaches to urban development became central to US and European debates within architecture, and led in part to the formation of the new quasi-discipline of urban design.<sup>39</sup>

### Urban Policy and Urban Design Skills: The UK and Beyond

The previous background discussions set the context for how the URB activities relate to professional practice in the UK today. For URB, the examples about how form and social responsibility connect in urban design practice remain relevant; as do the pedagogic implications from contemporary critics that those responsible for the art and physical design of cities have lost touch with the skills to learn from the "qualities of everyday life."<sup>40</sup> In recent examples from the past twenty-five years in the

<sup>33</sup> *The popularity of the profession among young people has increased and now includes celebrity endorsements from international know actors and pop-s (Glancey, 2011) and is celebrated in line of children's dolls to 'capture the and style of architects' for young girls. [http://icanbe.barbie.com/en\\_us/gam/amazing-architect.html](http://icanbe.barbie.com/en_us/gam/amazing-architect.html) (20 March 21)*

<sup>34</sup> *RIBA 2000, in response to the influential government reports behind the chair; Latham (1994) and Egan (1998).*

<sup>35</sup> *"... a Faustian bargain where they [architects] became more prominent their role less significant." Koolhaas Shigematsu, 2011.*

<sup>36</sup> *Geddes, 298*

<sup>37</sup> *Giedion 1967*

<sup>38</sup> *Broadly (1968) cited in Taylor 1998:*

<sup>39</sup> *Mumford, E., 2006.*

<sup>40</sup> *Gehl, 2001 [1971].*



UK, the government's own assessments conclude that policies on existing cities have not always delivered on the aspirations of quality or inclusivity

"Regeneration programmes have too often concentrated on changing buildings, rather than helping people...Past experience has shown that massive investment can be made in building or refurbishing residential or business property with very little impact on local people".<sup>41</sup>

Seen against subsequent reports and debates about award-winning building projects,<sup>42</sup> these findings suggest urban development projects that focus on individual building projects, over a more holistic approach to public use and needs, can tick one or more evaluative boxes as a 'successful' development (for example, investment return, statutory objectives, iconic design) without necessarily achieving a "good quality of life for the whole community"<sup>43</sup> or having a significant impact on economic and social regeneration of inner city populations.<sup>44</sup> Relevant to Urban Research Belfast it also highlights a need to develop skills to identify issues that could have an impact on local people, or could contribute to a more authentic sense of place, but may not necessarily involve planning or design a building in the first instance.

There are those who argue on the contrary, that these aspects of the profession should not be the impetus for education or professional action – those who promote greater aesthetic autonomy for architects from clients and other disciplines for example or who promote greater use of digital tools as the basis of new forms for cities.<sup>45</sup> The full debate are beyond the scope of this book to address or resolve but critics of calls for greater autonomy or a reliance on digitally produced form contend that architects "have collectively disengaged from real decision-making and that the profession is caught in a 'cult of iconographic mediocrity',"<sup>46</sup> which has resulted in the sidelining of the profession in the UK and elsewhere. From a qualitative perspective on quality of place the obsession with gestural form and iconic design as drivers for development rather than qualities of life can produce poor quality environments for people<sup>47</sup> or what Gehl refers to as 'birdshit architecture'<sup>48</sup> and others call "novelties" and "pathological urban contexts".<sup>49</sup>

Looking forward In the UK, at the time of this research project, successive Government regeneration policies on local infrastructure, services and development continue to promote more private sector initiatives for regeneration. Under the most recent Localism policy,<sup>50</sup> changes to planning, housing, regeneration and economic growth also emphasise greater creative collaboration between private and third sector organisations, with local public institutions, and more local partnerships to design and deliver local places.<sup>51</sup> The RIBA's response (2011) sought to show

<sup>41</sup> SEU 2000: 29.

<sup>42</sup> *English Partnerships, 2007; SEU, 2000; HCA, 2011;*

<sup>43</sup> ODP, 2000.

<sup>44</sup> *Imrie and Raco, 2003:4; An issued report earlier about US development projects; Harvey, 1989.*

<sup>45</sup> *Schumacher, 2010; Leach 2010*

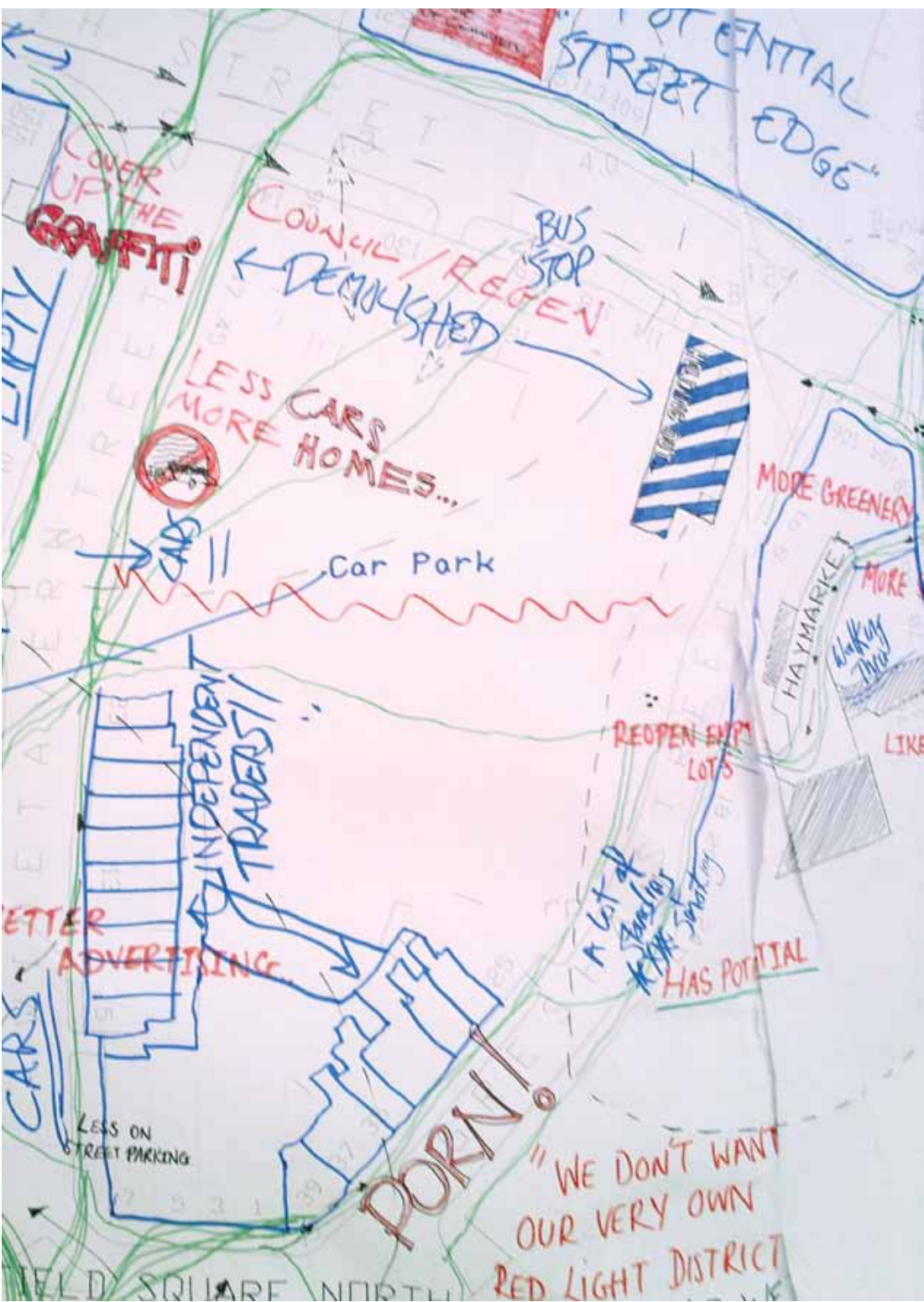
<sup>46</sup> *Spiller, 2010*

<sup>47</sup> *Gehl, 2006[1971]; Kent 2007*

<sup>48</sup> *Gehl, at a speech to the RIBA, 30 November 2011, referring to the form obsession since the 1960s in which architects and urban planners view cities as if from a great height and 'drop' their building forms with little regard for the effects of the pedestrian level scale a spaces. Cited by the author.*

<sup>49</sup> *Perez-Gomez, 2005.*

<sup>50</sup> *DCLG 2011*





the profession adapting pro-actively, issued guidance calling the changes:

"[A] powerful opportunity to change attitudes towards development through genuine, positive and inspiring engagement [...and demonstrate] the power of good design and the value of our profession in shaping better places and helping deliver a better quality of life."<sup>52</sup>

According to government sources however (2011), there remains a gap in what it refers to as the appropriate skills to deliver "good urban design" and "quality of place"; 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."<sup>53</sup>

### Summary Thoughts: A Critical Future

Urban Research Belfast takes a critical approach to the future of architecture through educational strategies and design pedagogy, which may influence future professionals. Through design education, URB questions existing professional roles and ideologies on inter-disciplinary practices and public engagement. URB does not aim to exclude or denigrate the value of art and design in architecture or the important role of materials or tectonic considerations in quality places and buildings, but it grounds architecture's traditional apotheosis of construction detail and digital technology through more humanist considerations of public space and everyday qualities of life.<sup>54</sup> The projects presented attempt to situate these elements in a holistic framework of design values related to the city and the broader role of architects in contemporary society.

URB's critical approach argues – as others have already<sup>55</sup> – that early stages of architectural education are the appropriate place and means to implement this realignment of the profession; to allow for more activist, participatory and transformative roles in mainstream urban development, and in society. Even in the uncertain period of recession, the challenges of urbanisation, more stratified societies, and more transient lifestyles suggest that transferable urban design skills to work creatively at different scales, with different people, and in different geographic or cultural contexts will become increasingly important.

During the twenty-first century, a knowledge economy, in which creative skills are valued, is expected to develop around urban areas and become more important in the UK.<sup>56</sup> As Bailey argues, "knowledge is not a substitute for architectural imagination but inadequate knowledge would handicap the general level of design."<sup>57</sup> To remain relevant in these areas, architects and architecture pedagogy need to adapt the way knowledge is gained and shared, with enough flexibility for experimentation with other disciplines to promote transformative types of knowledge as a valid form

of professional entrepreneurialism - cultural versus investment capital.

In these debates, in the UK and Europe, critical proponents of architecture have developed a growing consensus for "practice as a locus for critical action, and thus propose a form of social engagement that is situated and embedded in the real."<sup>58</sup> In professional literature and examples of practice there is more recent evidence of explicit support for working beyond disciplinary, professional and institutional silos, and the use of methods for engaging local people at the earliest stages of development consideration affecting the public realm:<sup>59</sup>

"...because that's what we do...we're interested in making space public, ie: making it richer, questioning who the public is in the conversation."<sup>60</sup>

At the time of this research, the above critical view of architecture is on the periphery of practice and pedagogy although it is growing more prevalent in research and practice outputs across the UK, Ireland and mainland Europe under the collective term of agency or 'spatial agency'.<sup>61</sup> There is also greater range of debate since 2005 of more outreach and studies focused on the issues – for and against – greater participation in architecture and urban design.<sup>62</sup> As part of this growing concern, Urban Research Belfast reinforces aspirations for future architects and urban designers to take on all the aspects of participation and collaboration as part of their "embedded knowledge, skills and imagination" in Till's terms, to be used "in an open curious way in order to contribute to the making of new spatial possibilities".<sup>63</sup> For URB this means using creative skills to influence the discussions about public and private space in the first instance, challenging and contributing to aspirations and visions for new spatial possibilities of place, whether by shaping existing spaces or making new ones.

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