



MACHINE FOR EXPERIENTIAL URBAN LEARNING

INTERDISCIPLINARY DESIGN RESEARCH
Saul Golden & Liam McComish



I'm Free!

KINDNESS OF PRODUCE

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MACHINE FOR EXPERIENTIAL URBAN LEARNING

Edited by Saul Golden and Liam McComish

This book introduces Urban Research Belfast (URB), an interdisciplinary design-education project between the departments of Architecture and Visual (graphic) Communication at the University of Ulster, Belfast (Ulster). Since 2009, a total of 200 undergraduate students and supporting staff from both departments at the University of Ulster have contributed to the project, along with significant support from external professionals, community-based organisations, government representatives and members of the public.¹

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Our mission is to positively influence the creating and sustaining of excellent places and buildings, making Northern Ireland an environment of exceptional quality for all.



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Foreword/ **LIZA FIOR**

Unlike furniture making or fashion design, those who wish to work at the scale of the city tend to resort to visuals and master-plans to describe their intentions, not a prototype or a toile. There is a value in making a proposal for real, if temporarily, for the temporary can be a test of the possible. These projects demonstrate that a simple act itself can be a powerful act of transformation. This ambitious collaboration shows how use can change meaning, occupation is a means to suspend belief and demonstrate what the risky unknown might look like.

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PREFACE

Urban Research Belfast is part of ongoing collaborative research about experiential learning and ways to better connect place theory with *real* skills for urban design, influenced by our roles as educators and practitioners in our respective fields of architecture and graphic design. Machines for Experiential Urban Learning (MEUL) represents the combined original output of the project so far, creative mechanisms for teaching, learning and investigating about place in existing urban environments.

Our approach, through URB, emphasizes the value of getting lost, or at least questioning negative preconceptions about marginal areas of existing cities. The MEULs require designers to become more than transitory flâneurs, to explore with more purpose and to become more attuned to implicit and explicit local narratives.

Book Structure

We have loosely structured the book into sections and chapters that reflect stages of the project research, and teaching and learning methods. As with the project's mix of structured and student-led teaching and learning methods, the book combines formal essay chapters mixed with less formal vignettes about the project context and individual project activities.

The introductory chapter establishes the background to URB, its cross-disciplinary approach to the physical context of Belfast, and its broader conceptual and pedagogic framework, which connects architecture and graphic design practice, education, and theory. The chapter also identifies the academic and professional relationships between spatial and graphic design in the built environment that support URB's interdisciplinary approach to investigative urban design processes. The vignette in this section provides more detail about the specific project study area of Smithfield and Union, Belfast.

The following essay chapters detail pedagogic and practice-led aspects of URB in relation to architecture and graphic design. The vignettes in this section describe the chronology and detail of the project's main outcomes. These outcomes are illustrated across key project steps that progress from abstract lessons in the studios to more active field investigations and interventions.

The main section on URB follows the project through its stages of implementation, feedback and evolution. Based on extensive photo and video documentation, and our observations, combined with structured and anecdotal feedback from students, project participants and the public, these chapters provide reflection and conjecture about the project's short and long-term impacts, successes, and shortcomings. Conclusions and suggestions for future research set URB in a wider context of design education and professional practice debates.

In the final chapter, the former Director of PLACE (The Architecture and Built Environment Centre of Northern Ireland), Michael Hegarty, contributes an essay that sets the themes of collaboration, participation and design quality – which underpin URB's academic research – in the context of specific examples of PLACE's work in ongoing community outreach projects. This contribution discusses development challenges in Northern Ireland that are also common to many urban and rural communities worldwide. Hegarty illustrates how wider debates about the future shape and quality of the built environment have been addressed in Northern Ireland through PLACE's work with professionals, policy-makers and local communities; and through ongoing academic support.

A note to reader

This book – like the city – is not regarded as a finished product. It is presented as both a collective whole, and as a network of individual themed sections. We invite readers to proceed methodically or to use the contents as an orientating guide, entering at different points and getting lost in the experiences and lessons; not necessarily in a predetermined order, but hopefully finding a useful part of our narrative and the students' outcomes that can be adapted to other settings and applications.

Saul Golden and Liam McComish. May 2012