

## SHADOW GAPS AND PEACE LINES

### Architecture, authenticity and the interface

Northern Ireland has changed dramatically in the last ten years. The impact of the Belfast Agreement on our political landscape is constantly assessed and debated, but has it changed our urban and cultural landscapes; our architecture?

Clearly the peace process brought early dividends for architects and the construction industry: The annual turnover of the construction industry in Northern Ireland increased from £3.36 billion in 2000 to £6 billion in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Things look very different in 2009 as world markets tumble, however if recession has a positive side, it may be to allow a space to reflect, digest and propose new directions.

Since 1998 our profession has enjoyed ten good years, but who has really benefited from that boom? Has the vast expenditure and effort brought any tangible benefits at community level in our post-conflict towns and cities? Is architectural design relevant when faced with complex and competing agendas? We claim to be the key players in regeneration projects but what influence does the profession really have over the context and content of urban development and renewal?

These questions permeate the 'Your Space or Mine?' (YSOM?) research project, undertaken by Mike McQueen, Prof. Hisham Elkadi, Dr Jenny Millar and Dr Peter Geoghegan with input from artist Peter McCaughey. The project has its origins in a request for assistance from an interface community group in prioritising community interest in proposals for a key river-front site, close to the Brandywell/Fountain interface in

Derry/Londonderry. Previous projects exploring issues of diversity and stakeholder representation in design processes established a basis for YSOM?, which was funded by the European Union Peace 2.1 programme, through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

Findings from YSOM? and preceding studies suggest architects and architectural design skills could hold a key position in moving towards integrated and shared futures in Northern Ireland. However the work also suggests that to be truly effective in complex and contested social contexts, architects need to embrace a paradigm shift from current modes of education and practice and allow space for the development of participatory design skills.

Responding to this perceived deficit, YSOM? employed community based artists in poetry sessions, art workshops, guerrilla gardening and temporary urban 'transformations', recording and expressing cross-community values, experience and ambition.

This approach drew from contemporary planning, public art and conflict transformation theory. Work in these fields converge on issues of engagement highlighted in Lederachs call for "a new set of lenses through which we do not primarily see the setting and the people in it as the 'problem' and the outsider as the 'answer'. Rather, we understand the long-term goal of transformation as validating and building on people and resources within the setting" (Lederach 1995)<sup>ii</sup> YSOM? also benefited from significant input and support from Derry City Council, DSD and other statutory and private development agents in more usual consultation techniques. The qualitative nature of the arts workshops, supporting ►





► expression of both positive and negative community experience, provided a deliberate counter to the usual statistical reading of communities through the Noble Measures of Deprivation<sup>iii</sup>. Noble determines community quality of life by identifying areas of under-performance (health, education, economic well-being etc). Resident surveys, however, often defy such readings by returning high resident satisfaction rates in areas which are, statistically, amongst the most deprived in the UK. The analysis of YSOM? findings, instead adapted Audit Commission Area Profiling methods<sup>iv</sup> allowing the diverse types of data gathered in the workshop stage to be read together, informing potential design responses.

Significantly YSOM? went on to examine the roles of urban renewal (DSD) and the social economy (DETI) in developing shared space and examined innovative urban design and renewal precedents to propose a series of recommendations to move interface development towards sustainable and shared futures.

Ultimately the project re-directed architectural skills to discover and release 'locked-in' social, cultural and financial capital, defining a community-driven interface development strategy. This process identified key resources and potential revenue streams capable of supporting long-term active-citizenship and capacity-building in developing shared-future strategies. The funders' report and summary report are available for download at: [www.yourspaceormine.org.uk](http://www.yourspaceormine.org.uk).

The reports proposed re-direction of architectural skills towards participatory forms of practice raises questions for professional operation and education. Although not mainstream practice,

diverse examples of the creative potential of such an approach can be found in work by, amongst others, muf architects in the UK and Auburn University's Rural Studio in the USA.

The case for a professional shift towards dialogical and participatory practice is not a new one. In 'Architecture and Participation' (2005)<sup>v</sup> Peter Blundell-Jones et al. outlined a theoretical and ethical imperative for an architecture of engagement, reframing a line of architectural enquiry stretching back to the 1960's.

What is new is the global recognition that we need new ideas following the failure of the western neo-liberal value system, witnessed by the current global financial crisis.

For 20 years, claims have been made for the inevitable social benefits of free-market de-regulation. This rationale for short-sighted short-term solutions has dove-tailed neatly with architectures abject retreat from post-modern accusations of catastrophically inept social experimentation.

Post-conflict, Northern Ireland has been free to enjoy the free-market party, with place-making, branding and market-led development replacing technocratic land-use and conflict management as priorities for planning. In all of these processes the architect is, in varying degrees, removed from the implications of their practice. Perhaps it is only possible to unreservedly love the process and product of architectural design when removed from its less palatable implications (environmental impact, economic and social polarisation, globalisation), safe in the illusion that bigger issues are being dealt with elsewhere.

► Education has a key role in this removal. In 'The Lost Judgement',<sup>vi</sup> Jeremy Till suggests that architectural education is a form of indoctrination in which architectural students take on new values and a new language to become informed and skilled but detached. It may be that this indoctrination and detachment, this distance, is essential to a discipline claiming a social conscience while operating in a neo-liberal professional context.

But if the criticism is accepted: architectural education is a form of indoctrination which facilitates professional detachment, resulting in celebration of process and product while abdicating responsibility for the implications of our product, is it possible to chart a new direction?

To do this requires a re-examination of the integrity of our professional activity and the authenticity of our exchange with the consumers of our architecture. Too often when faced with complex situations, we accept that our skills are used in what Robin Evans has called an 'architecture of forgetting'<sup>vii</sup> obscuring content with polished product and indulging loose focused ambition over clarity of purpose.

Lessons can perhaps be drawn from the world of fine art. For the last 30 years, a section of the art world has abandoned the gallery, employed by Rothko and other abstract artists as a space for elite retreat and reinforcement of higher values, as irrelevant to contemporary society. Instead dialogical forms of practice have emerged which propose participatory practice as a requirement in the process of "making" something finite, specific to context and yet profound. Examples are well documented, particularly in the field of public art. For example, the Hamburg Monument against War and Fascism by Jochen Gerz situated in Hamburg (1986)<sup>viii</sup>, dispels any concerns about lack of sophistication or quality produced through engagement.

Could an architecture of participation, built through creative understanding and shaping of intimate experience, steer our professional focus away from formal and material obsession,

ironmongery and shadow gaps and back towards the life within our towns and cities? Could it give voice and expression to sections of society silenced by 30 years of violence, embracing rather than embarrassed by the peace-lines?

Rather than spend our skills dressing urban futures determined by stylists, estate agents and financial institutes, YSOM? suggests that an architectural approach as engaging, wry and uniting as our local dialects and responding directly to our collective life experience, is within reach and worth pursuing.

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- i Figures supplied to authors by the Construction Employers Federation, 2008
- ii LEDERACH, J.P. (1995) *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, Syracuse University Press, New York
- iii M. NOBLE, G. W., M. LLYOD, C. DRIBBEN, G.A.N. SMITH (2001) *The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2001*. NISRA Occasional Paper no. 18. Belfast, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.
- iv AUDIT COMMISSION Area Profiles. Audit Commission, [Online] available at: <http://www.areaprofiles.audit-commission.gov.uk>
- v BLUNDELL, JONES, P., J, PETRESCU, D., TILL, J. (ed.). *Architecture and Participation*. London: Routledge; New Ed edition, 2005.
- vi TILL, J. (2004). "The Lost Judgement." *EAAE Writings in Architectural Education Prize*, Copenhagen.
- vii ROBIN EVANS, 'Mies van de Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries', *Translations from Buildings to Drawings and Other Essays*, London, Architectural Association, 1997, p269.
- viii GERZ, J. (1986) *Monument against war and fascism*. Hamburg.

(UTW Project funded by Derry City Council / Arts Council NI and Lottery Fund.)

