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Student city: architects can envision change

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Student City

Architects can envision change.

Jan Frohburg

In the present situation, UL exists as 'University outside of Limerick.' To get from the city centre to the university campus, it takes ten minutes to drive (traffic permitting) or twenty minutes by bike. And waiting for a bus may take you half an hour and more. Time-consuming as it may be, this is an emotional commute as well – from the grey streets of Limerick to the green campus of UL, this self-sufficient precinct by the Shannon. Hence, the geographical distance between city and university grows into a mental divide. As one student was clearly speaking his mind, "I came to study at UL, not in Limerick."

Designing with the city in mind

This of course is related to issues that Limerick has been associated with for a long time and which are now being addressed in the regeneration process. Yet, the regeneration effort is focused on four districts – Moyross, St. Mary's Park, Ballinacurra Weston and Southill – without relating these areas to the city centre, let alone to the university, be it as a place or as a resource for ideas.

Firmly committed not only to its location but also to the local community, SAUL actively participates and informs the discussion of the Limerick regeneration process and influences city development strategies. On two occasions, SAUL has invited all agencies involved in Limerick regeneration to a joint symposium to exchange and discuss their positions. The regeneration authorities as well as planning officials appreciated the input from third-level institutions and were impressed to discover the level of commitment and expertise a university can offer through their faculty. Currently, national and communal attention is absorbed by the Limerick regeneration project. Limerick would not be readily identified as a student city – a perception we attempt to change. Student City was the theme for third year design studio in the spring semester of 2009.¹ This 'design studio' is the main way to teach architectural design. The design studio is an intense teaching/learning situation that comprises individual desk tutorials and group reviews, field trips and themed workshops. It aims at integrating diverse skills and should be understood as a complex method that is problem-focused, context driven and interdisciplinary.

I consider Student City an evident part of our participation in the regeneration effort because I am convinced that the whole city needs to be taken into account. We introduce architectural proposals as a contribution to a local and national discourse. Local decisions are to be understood within the larger context of the whole island. And, as in this project, regeneration and revitalisation are not brought about by physical acts, i.e. building, alone. They require a social and economic infrastructure to support them. Successful architecture depends on this, and that explains why we consider this part of an architect's concern and necessarily part of an architect's education.

In order to back our ambition with action, SAUL made a move into the city. Since September of last year, we have occupied what was Old St. Munchin's church on King's Island. Previously used as a rehearsal space by the Island Theatre Company, fourth year students have renovated the space and furnished it for a

multitude of uses. We hold exhibitions there and reviews, have meetings and workshops, and we open the church for discussions and film screenings.

The appropriation of St. Munchin's and the Student City project both stand in a line of projects engaging with Limerick – city and region. In previous projects third-year design studio in SAUL proposed development perspectives for an abandoned hotel/sanatorium in the region, or responded to a local community action group. In this case, students from secondary Castletroy College set the brief for a youth café and community centre. We discussed the brief in a public meeting with members of the local community as well as school representatives. The finished design schemes were publicly presented to this action group again in order to inform their further decision-making process.

In the autumn semester 2008, third year students worked on numerous proposals for a New Limerick Library. The design studio project addressed the pendant relocation of Limerick's city library. Although this is an actually pressing problem in Limerick city, the design studio tried to reach beyond purely answering to the city's needs and discussed the role of a library, of books and recorded knowledge in general, asking if, where and how current changes might impact on location and conception of a building. We understood the City Library not only as a building for books but as a contribution to the on-going efforts of social inclusion, the regeneration of Limerick communities and the emergence of a civic forum. These projects shall serve as a basis for a wider discussion on the aspirations and demands regarding contemporary library facilities in Limerick. Limerick City Library hosted public exhibition of these designs as SAUL's contribution to Library Ireland Week 2009.

For the more recent Student City project we adopted Limerick's Milk Market area as our site. This area shares qualities that encourage redevelopment: it is city centre and well connected by public transport, within easy access to communal facilities and well served by a variety of local shops and services. Spaces for ateliers, workshops and living are cheaply available. The Milk Market area is the centre of city nightlife, home to a striving art scene (with Limerick Printmakers amongst others) and the site of an active regional market. It has an established mix of residential and commercial uses – and: it is not in the 'precious' Georgian quarter. The Milk Market area, in short, is marginalised but central and well serviced, neglected but active and interesting. At the same time we are astonished to see that investors and developers have abandoned their projects in the area. As a yet another testing ground for SAUL involvement with Limerick city we proposed the re-development of this area as Student City. Rather than designing a 'pretty piece of architecture' we wanted our students to design a scenario, a scenario of change. Hence our question: What if 500 students would live in that area?

Proposing scenarios of change

The third-year design studio fosters self-directed investigation and empowers students to conceive a thesis-driven project. Students have to observe, to analyse and to project. In responding to a series of open-ended challenges each of the 28 third year students identifies and addresses positive qualities and pressing issues within the neighbourhood. Students were challenged to relay insights gathered in interviews with people living or working locally. In developing this project they have talked to people with a very specific attachment to the locale and others representing national institutions: a trustee of the Milk Market and the director of Lyric FM, a resident market trader and a real estate auctioneer, the local priest with no

congregation and the alert proprietor of an adult sex shop, a philanthropist art collector and an enthusiastic lady running a Chicago-style diner.

Apart from the contact with local people, design studio started to involve UL faculty outside of architecture, most prominently from the Ralahine Centre for Utopian Studies.² The Ralahine Commune and the Limerick Soviet were introduced as particular events in local history.³ In learning about those specific utopian projects we discovered emerging possibilities in contemporary Limerick that are based in such utopian traces or spectres as well as in new conditions. The capacity to understand the past as a historic development paralleled by utopian ideas and projects that have actually influenced an emerging present strengthens the ability and motivation in a student not only to critically challenge main-stream development prospects but to envision an alternative future.

In their design responses the students were expected to think beyond 'student accommodation', looking instead at the social infrastructure necessary to support a student community. The students had to define programmes of their own to include public and communal, recreational and educational, commercial as well as cultural facilities, to provide for recycling, energy creation, communication services etc. They identified unused buildings, abandoned construction sites and vacant lots as possible locations for interventions. In this context small interventions may become a catalysts of change. To identify such transformer sites and to deploy them as 'detonator' and 'engine' was at the centre of our concern. These sites became points of origin from which potential change will spread out into the surrounding neighbourhood. In the process the students have learned about precedents of similar developments. In the past, and famously in places like New York or Berlin, students and artists have pioneered the revival of cities. Termed 'storm troopers of gentrification,' they identified quarters for them to live in and work there – a process that likely triggers gentrification and sustained development of inner-city areas.

Some have taken their specific experiences with student accommodation as a point of departure and developed their projects as a critique of the comfortable yet hotel-like character of the standard 'double-bed en-suite' that allowed for little social interaction or self-expression. Others have found inspiration in qualities so far overlooked in the area and proposed to build on uses of urban space beyond re-tail like the integration of small-scale workshops with apprentice living. Superficial in their approach, the majority of proposals left its critical potential underdeveloped and students quite readily settled for mainstream ideas. The ability to relate individual projects to the fundamentals of society emerges as a prerequisite to successful civic engagement and needs to be developed fully in every student.

The students were challenged to condense all previous consideration in regard to site, programme and precedents into a 'design manifesto' and to convey the main ambition of their design effort either in writing or, preferably, through a key image. This expressed ambition was to serve as a benchmark against which to test the actual achievements and the student's progress in the design process. Clarity of intent and a strong sense of purpose were most valued.

Developing an urban perspective

All this is happening against a darkening backdrop of an economic downturn. Market-driven development has come to a standstill. The recent hedonistic period in Irish architecture has ended. This should allow for reflection and adjustment. Upon questioning the driving forces in urban growth we are convinced that universities are to play a key role in sustained development. UL as any academic institution needs to

develop a distinctly urban perspective. This must be understood not as a moral obligation to step in where private investment has failed, but as a quite opportunistic chance to re-conceptualise higher education. In the same way as the presence of the university, through its students, will impact on the city, an engagement with the city will impact upon the university, upon its teaching practices, research ideas and community interaction.

This particular project opened an opportunity to collaborate with other third-level institutions, locally and internationally.⁴ And we critically discussed the Limerick's City Centre Development Plan with planning officials from the city council – one response was a proposal to strengthen the link between the existing campus and the city centre through the creation of new routes and alternative modes of transportation. Through discussing their ideas with different audiences – architects and outside academics, planners and local people – students started to relate their arguments accordingly, thus enhancing their communication skills vital for community interaction. Student City initiated plans for further alliances based on the shared ambition to get students to engage in their locale and in collaborative projects alike.

In the process of designing students worked from very radical positions or embraced a contingent approach, assuming a top-down master-planning attitude or considering bottom-up interactive practices. Too often I found our students to be of little imagination in where and how to challenge conventional concepts, to envision alternative ways of living as a student in an urban environment. They felt little compelled to reach beyond what was familiar to them from personal experience. Yet they need to be encouraged in their ambitions – in the words of Daniel Burnham, “Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood...”

Still, all projects recognised the importance of creating a public realm – in addition to providing for housing, shops etc. – and to search for its appropriate expression through architecture. While one student imagined the Milk Market as a forum of student life beyond its current main-day existence as a bleak car-park, another took action by setting up an ‘architectural’ market stand in order to discuss concepts of ‘recycling’ the neighbourhood to give it a fresh lease of life. By suggesting a new practice of architecture new spaces emerged, both physical and imaginary, allowing for new and richer ways to interact.

In understanding the political and poetic dimensions of architecture proposed interventions may act as ‘platform’ or ‘incubator’, as ‘factory’ or ‘ivory tower’. In the process we come to understand utopian thought as experiment and interpretation, as cognitive method of critique and anticipatory design. In design studio we adopt a contemporary mode of knowledge production that is characterised as context-driven, problem-focused, interdisciplinary, and even criticised as “tinged with political commitment.”

Architectural proposals contribute to a local and national discourse. Ireland's on-going transition to a knowledge-based economy provides the setting for our design studio projects. This is a process of national transformation, which has implications beyond architecture education. Maybe we can come to think of design studio teaching in general and Student City in particular as models of civic and academic engagement alike.

Endnotes

This article summarises a presentation given at the Campus Engage conference. This international conference provided participants from communities and institutions for higher education with an opportunity to discuss the potential for change offered by civic engagement partnerships in areas such as service learning, community outreach, research, civic education and volunteering. The Campus Engage International Conference 2009 “Higher Education and Civic Engagement Partnerships: Create, Challenge, Change” – Dublin, Ireland, June 4th–5th, 2009 – www.conference.campusengage.ie

1. The third-year design studio team were Jan Frohburg, Maria Donoghue and John O’Reilly with additional support from Javier Burón, Irénée Scalbert, Professor Tom Cosgrove, Miriam Dunn and Graham Petrie – many thanks to all of them.
2. We have to thank Professor Tom Moylan, Professor Luke Ashworth and Deirdre NíChuanachain for sharing their insights at the Lived Utopias symposium on March 5th, 2009.
3. The Ralahine Commune was a co-operative society, which existed on the estate of John Vandeleur in county Clare from 1831 until 1833. Along with assuring prosperity, it aimed to protect its adult members and to promote their physical and intellectual well-being as well as to educate all minors. – In 1919 the Limerick Soviet instigated a brief moment of what is perceived today as independent local government. While historical evidence suggests a different story (that of a general strike led by trade unionists with a strong nationalist bias), it’s the idea of ‘government by the people’ that inspires the political left in Ireland to date.
4. We have to thank Sean Taylor of the Sculpture & Combined Media course in the Limerick School for Art and Design (LSAD) and Professor Robert Mull from London Metropolitan University, Department of Architecture and Spatial Design for contributing to the project through lectures and as guest critics as well as Richard Tobin of Limerick’s Regeneration Agency and Kieran Reeves of Limerick City Council for introducing and discussing development strategies.

Reference

Jan Frohburg, “Student City – Architects can envision change,” in *Uncommissioned Report – Limerick City*, The SAUL Press, Limerick, 2012, pp. 54–58. http://saul.ie/downloads/SAUL_LimerickReport.pdf (accessed 12 November 2015)