Wasteland: a collaborative studio

Dermot Boyd



'When architectural ideas are shared and worked upon together, the resultant critical discourse is more expansive and relevant'

Studio remains the physical and intellectual space at the heart of every good architectural school. It is a forum for the sharing of ideas and a place in which to work together in order to explore architecture and its role in shaping our environment, society and culture. It should reveal interesting contrasts and synergies between the particular and the universal, the individual and the collective.

I believe that that the power of the studio as a learning environment best reveals itself when studio teaching focuses on a collaborative process between students. Too often studio revolves around the individual. There is a constant search for genius and a reverence for the singular work. This quasi-artistic approach encourages particular psychological mind-sets that, through an over-reliance on intuition and emotion, favour introspection and abstract creative fantasy. It is a way of working that leads to a competitive non-collaborative learning environment. However, if we are more pragmatic and scientific in our approach and if we see ourselves as part of a continuum of research and experimentation, then as teachers we can detach ourselves from our own and our students' personal obsessions and establish pedagogical structures to help balance the objective and subjective nature of design in studio. When architectural ideas are shared and worked upon together, the resultant critical discourse is more expansive and relevant, and the solutions more insightful and useful to society.

It is this collaborative approach in studio that we have been evolving as a team over the last five years in the third year of the undergraduate programme at the Dublin School of Architecture, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). We have attempted to discover teaching methods through which we can bring the students' work together in pursuit of one goal, one project, and in doing so form a body of incremental architectural and urban research. To support the collaborative process, each studio lasts a full academic year (twenty-six weeks) and is always based around a theme – a conceptual lens through which the staff and students can explore aspects of contemporary life or architecture both as a group and as individuals. It provides an intellectual sounding board and a theoretical benchmark against which students are encouraged to propose, share, test and revisit their thinking throughout the year.

Last year, we took the theme of 'wasteland' – using dictionary definitions of waste as 'not inhabited or cultivated ... superfluous, no longer serving a purpose' and of wasteland as 'not used for cultivation or building'. For the project, then, we investigated the urban landscape through such space.

This marginalised ground surrounds us everywhere. It is part of the complexity and multiplicity of an unravelled urban fabric. In the Irish city, wasteland is particularly evident and has many forms: derelict buildings, awkward empty plots, abandoned floors above shops on the high street and strips of land awaiting some infrastructural construct. Crumbling, boarded up or surrounded by palisade fencing,

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these spaces form a depressing backdrop and play no active part in the life of the city. The under-utilisation and dereliction of these inner-city sites came about through irresponsible speculation and corrupted local governance (especially in the recent economic boom): most development in Ireland is defined by private ownership and not by social policy or concerns for urban space. Cheaper land was acquired and exploited on the edges of the city leading to unquestioned sprawl with inadequate infrastructure – a fragmented and dysfunctional urban environment. In our project, we wished to redress this imbalance, to inhabit and cultivate urban wasteland and, by reclaiming it, to revitalise the city. We wished to erode the boundaries between public and private space, explore the public realm and understand the city as urban experience.

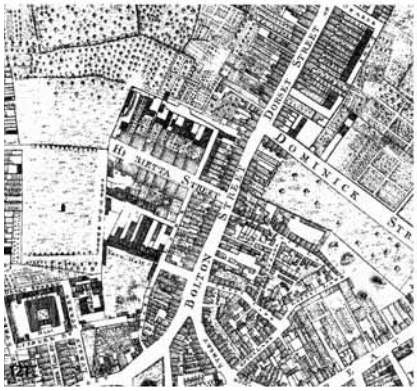
We did not need to go far to find the perfect site. Outside our school in the heart of Dublin, there lies a diverse, but marginalised urban environment, a city quarter perceived by many as problematic. Within its limits, stretching back from both sides of Bolton Street, there are pockets of dereliction, unused ground, abandoned sites and insensitive contemporary development. But there is also architectural potential in this wasteland, an opportunity to make a meaningful urban context out of its many active and varied parts: DIT itself, social housing blocks of the 1950s, the splendid Georgian terraces of Henrietta Street, the Neo-Classical set piece of the King's Inn and Constitution Hill by James Gandon and even the busy multiplex cinemas on Parnell Street. Potential future connections with the proposed DIT campus at Grangegorman to the west and the new transport hub at the disused Broadstone train station could also be invigorated by our exploration of this wasteland.

Seven projects, or parts, made up the year. Following a one-week, individual conceptual exploration of the theme, the second, five-week, project introduced methods of urban analysis and design. Twenty-one separate units of two or three students undertook specific analytical tasks over a three-week period including studies in measurement, architectural phenomena, morphology, legibility, ecology and lost habitats, economic and social cohesion, and model making. Following this analysis, an intensive masterplanning *charrette* was undertaken in two weeks, with seven units of seven students each making urban proposals. These projects were presented to a panel of invited representatives from the local community and the City Architects' Department and a winner selected that formed a loose framework for further development throughout the year. Concepts and proposals from the other six masterplans were incorporated into the final project.

An interlude in the form of a one-week field trip provided the opportunity to explore the nature of the public realm and adaptations of existing urban fabric in exemplary Italian and Swiss work: we saw the work of Grafton Architects at Bocconi University in Milan, Terragni in Como, Galfetti in Bellinzona, Snozzi in Monte Carasso, Scarpa in Verona and Palladio in Vicenza.

On our return, we began six weeks of 'Remaking the City'. As the chosen masterplan had identified seven urban spaces – or 'rooms' – for investigation and design, these areas formed the main focus of attention. Various architectural projects were now undertaken. Each urban room was carefully studied and a collection of buildings proposed for each site. Individual students and staff determined the brief and spatial arrangement of each building. With their individual projects, the students carefully collaborated and negotiated to make a successful urban set piece.

Two review weeks between the first and second semesters allowed time for the re-working or negotiation of adjacencies in each project to deliver a more coherent urban fabric. It also provided the students with an opportunity to re-visit their individual designs, in order to develop particular aspects of architectural thought and to represent their work more clearly



The Bolton Street area, from John Rocque's painstaking map of Dublin, 1756

'based around a theme – a conceptual lens through which the staff and students can explore aspects of contemporary life or architecture'



Real and imagined city: the Wasteland map, showing ground plans of buildings

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for final publication and exhibition.

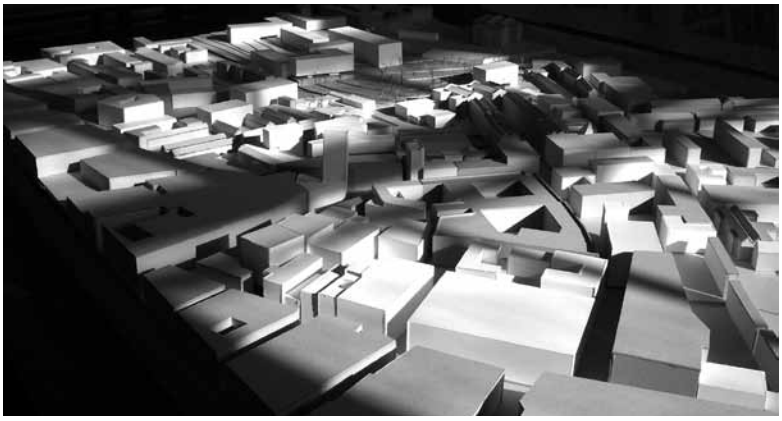
The second semester began with a seven-week project similar to 'Remaking the City' but this time moving more rapidly to establish a coherent urban strategy and the design of buildings within it. A strict working methodology was set out with weekly exercises and objectives investigating materiality, haptics, use, occupation, atmosphere and representation so as to encourage the student to understand what it means to 'inhabit' architecture and the city through their work.

Students were then given various specific tasks for three weeks. Small units or individuals designed each of the urban spaces to articulate their topography with hard and soft landscaping. Other students worked on individual projects that had been selected for the final masterplan, re-working them to bring them closer to the experiential. In parallel, other students re-worked the masterplan, producing large-scale maps and models for review, including the selected projects. It was through an evolution of this mapping that the ambition and scale of the project became evident and areas identified that needed further design resolution.

The final project, for three weeks, was designed to fill those gaps, to bring the *Wasteland* together into one body of work for publication and exhibition and to promote collective ownership of the project. Units of staff and students worked to coordinate models, mapping, graphic quality, editing, analysis and post analysis work. Through this process, *Wasteland* became research recorded as artefact: a book – a tangible and accessible memory. For me, the fold-out map that forms the dust cover of the book became one of the strongest representations of the project, one drawing through which *Wasteland* is fully described: the ground floor plan of each new and existing building in the area is drawn so that one is invited to re-orientate oneself in this real and imagined part of the city.

In this cycle of studio education, the concept of wasteland proved a most interesting theme as it challenged our reading and preconceived understanding of the city. We began the year with a more limited brief, an examination of the city through fragments but, following our analysis and masterplanning exercises, our ambition as a collective grew and became more strategic. We did not merely wish to play with the pieces but to examine their role in the whole three-dimensional urban puzzle that surrounds us and to make a new quarter in the city full of life and experience.

Wasteland revolved around a critique of 'ownership': on one hand, beyond the studio, of the unquestioned expression of private ownership in the city to the detriment of the public realm; on the other, in studio, there was a loosening of creative ownership as the importance of the urban project became paramount and collaboration between students was recognised as critical to its success. Through intense intellectual exchange and speculation architectural concepts become more diverse, expansive and encompassing of city life. The students had formulated their own briefs and made their own buildings within the intellectual and physical context of the overall project. It was a process that allowed them autonomy as well as freedom from type-relative criticism; it helped them to be less defensive and to become more responsible and aware of the needs of others while at the same time developing a critical awareness of when it was appropriate to hold on to the architectural integrity of their own work. Ironically, we found that it was in the creative gaps, the liminal space, the intellectual and virtual wasteland between projects that architecture and urban design in particular found their place and took on a more humane form and identity.



A new quarter in the city: the massing model produced for DIT's end of year show

'We did not merely wish to play with the pieces but to examine their role in the whole three-dimensional urban puzzle that surrounds us'



Collaboration in the studio: students, tutors and guests at the final review

Dermot Boyd is a founding partner of Boyd Cody Architects in Dublin. For the last five years he has been co-ordinating third year at DIT as part of a team that also includes Sinead Bourke, Andrew Clancy, Patrick Harrington, Donal Hickey, Neasa Hourigan, Colm Moore and Janek Ozmin

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