Education, Design and Practice – Understanding skills in a Complex World

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Educating the architect to make spatial sense of complex matters of public concern

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• Abstract (300 words):
Architecture evolves at the confluence of multiple, interrelated and often competing demands. At the human end of the spectrum, the requirements of clients, planners, users and the design team have to be taken into consideration. At the non-human end of the spectrum, the physical environmental context, the construction material, the aesthetic preferences, the regulatory framework and multiple political agendas influence the becoming of architecture. At the beginning of every design task, the architect has to make spatial sense of this complexity and identify how she is entangled within it. This is not a simple undertaking. As educators, we question how we can best prepare the nascent architect to deal with such a task. Drawing on actor-network theory, we have established an annual five-day architectural pedagogical event titled Public CoLab that aims to equip students with an efficient method for understanding complex issues of public concern in the Northern Ireland. At this immersive event, the students interrogate an overarching theme from a variety of different angles, and incorporate knowledge from multiple disciplinary perspectives, to establish a in-depth spatial understanding of the issue. This paper will illustrate the format of the event with reference to Public CoLab 2019, where we examined how water has influenced, and continues to influence, the development of built environment and lived experience of
Belfast. With the help of subject experts from academia, the public sector and charitable organizations, 73 architecture students mapped the historical and contemporary local water networks, mapped the heavy metal content of the contemporary water supply, visualized flooding futures, contextualized water scarcity and examined water as a place making device. We reflect on the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach and identify its strengths and weaknesses, so that it can be adopted by other architectural educators with similar goals.

•Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Dr. Nuala Flood is a multidisciplinary design researcher with over 17 years of post graduate experience inclusive of architectural practice, design research, lecturing and teaching. She is a lecturer in architecture at Queen’s University Belfast and has expert knowledge in co-design methods and practices for spatial practitioners. She is also a registered project architect who has successfully managed the development of a large variety of complex project types, including housing, masterplans, office refurbishments and libraries.

Tristan Sturm is currently interested in critical public health geographies. He just finished an ethnographic DRILL funded project on spaces of empowerment for people with dementia. Since 2016 he has been researching lead drinking water pipes and the historical and present health impacts of lead in Belfast, the UK, and Ireland. He is a key stakeholder in the “Unleaded Spaces” contextual project being run as Public Colab (http://publiccolab.com) in 2018-2019 in Architecture. He is finishing a book, The Future is a Foreign Country, on American Christian Zionist pilgrims in Israel and Palestine.