

RESPECTING BUILDINGS IN NI

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I was brought up in the tail end of 'The Troubles,' so much so that I never really felt affected by them. It's only in retrospect I see that it has entirely defined the relationship I have with the city I call home.

'The Town', as Belfast city centre was ominously referred to in my youth, felt like another country; full of danger, glimpsed only in grainy news reports and rushed shopping trips. This is why I found the Urban Design Sum-

mer School hosted by PLACE, Belfast's centre for architecture and the built environment, so refreshing.

Based in an empty shop unit in the Obel Tower, this week long summer school was open exclusively to people aged 14 to 19. Activities over the week included presentations by local designers, theorists and built environment professionals, tours of contemporary iconic architecture around Belfast such as the MAC, the Lyric and the newly renovated Ulster Museum, as well as sketching and model making workshops. A particularly revealing workshop asked 'What is Belfast missing', prompting a diversity of responses from 'more appreciation for historic buildings' to 'warehouse raves.'

I believe initiatives like this enable the young participants to have a dramatically different relationship with the city than I did in the years leading up to and immediately after the 'peace process.' But further more it also tackles an unforeseen product of peace; the widespread attitude that, because the city was so starved of civic progress during the violence, any development is good development. So much of our built environment is judged purely from the view of short term financial gain rather than the long term goal of a quality urban condition.

Director of PLACE Aidan McGrath describes the intentions of the school, "It's not our objective to encourage these 30 young people into a career in architecture or town planning. We're just hoping to make them... more discerning, more critical of the built environment and more demanding of those professionals and politicians who deliver it."

An informed, proactive, critical and involved populace is key to the development of a quality public realm. Initiatives like 'Somewhere_to' and the upcoming 'I Wish This Was...' workshops will hopefully arm the citizens of Belfast with the knowledge and confidence to demand more from those with the power to shape the city.

Now that we've started to heal our social situation perhaps it's time to heal our urban situation.



Photo [Top] by Robin Cordiner, Photo [Bottom] by Catherine McCormick.