

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

ALLEY SPACE INTERVENTION, BELFAST'S HOLY LANDS



The word 'student' has become a four-letter word in Belfast's Holy Lands. The events of St Patrick's Day three months ago served to underline years of strife between the student population and local residents of the South Belfast neighbourhood. A fledgling Architecture student society based at the University of Ulster decided to try and turn the tide of local opinion in student's favour.

Born out of an RSUA organised student forum held at PLACE, the idea was not established as a direct response to St Patrick's day, but rather sought to re-evaluate the vernacular Belfast terrace, paying particular attention to what the society's members regarded as it's biggest design flaw, the rear alleyway. This leftover, utilitarian space has become synonymous with anti-social behaviour, including drug-use and fly tipping, and is often used by burglars to gain discrete entry into properties.

After talking with the local residents of University and College Park Avenue the students came to the conclusion that this was mainly due to the lack of surveillance. One local resident recalled the days when, instead of being confined by nine-foot

high walls, private yards were enclosed with two-foot fences over which gossip and chat were exchanged, intended to simply demarcate ownership rather than create an aggressive fortification.

This vision of the alleyways' halcyon days inspired the society to attempt to recapture this atmosphere, and use it in an attempt to address the anti-social behaviour that takes place in such spaces. Hugh Magee, one of the event's organisers remarked "No space is provided for interacting with your neighbours any more while the alleyway would be perfect for this. If we can make landlords and residents rethink this space a greater sense of community and security could be created." Time and budget restraints made any permanent intervention unrealistic, so the group decided upon attempting to transform the existing alley space into a social area, creating a positive interface between the Holy Land's permanent and temporary denizens.

This was the thinking that led to the student collaboration invading one of these alley spaces on the 5th of June. A series of simple plywood partitions created a sense of place along the linear spine of the alley. A basic roof structure combined with overhanging foliage proved effective in creating the perception of an urban garden. And most importantly a bottle of beer, free food and a warm greeting created a welcoming atmosphere for anyone who turned up.

Despite initial fears that the event would be treated with suspicion and apathy in the wake of St Patrick's Day, the intervention was greeted with overwhelming positivity from all who attended. Over sixty people turned up over the three hours the intervention was in place, and even the PSNI made an appearance condoning the positive student action within the area. Local resident and psychology lecturer at the University of Ulster Professor Peter Weinreich gave his thoughts on the intervention, saying "the evening transformation of part of this space by this group of students was a lively encouraging event, successfully bringing together students and local long-term residents for lively chat. Music, food and beverage outside in the open contributed to a pleasurable occasion."

The group is currently planning further interventions within the city. ●

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