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Moments of recognition.
The four semester studio at
Queens Universtiy Belfast





The symbol of the red hand is used by most institutions in Northern Ireland including our own Queen's University Belfast. This image (*fig.1*) was made in 1950's to encourage visitors to Northern Ireland – the location of our school of architecture at Queen's University Belfast. The illustration refers to the source of this image – a mythological story concerning a boat race to the island involving two competing chieftains. Simply put, first to touch dry land would acquire ownership of the island. One of the chieftains senses he is behind in the race and therefore cuts off one of his hands, throws it forward onto the shore becoming in the act the first to touch terra firma. He gains possession and the nickname Red Hand Larry.



Belfast is the second city on the island of Ireland and is the administrative centre for Northern Ireland – part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Architecture in Queens University dates from 1965 and is run as a two part programme – a three year undergraduate and a two year masters programme. Historically the school supplied to the local profession and arguably that mindset led to a slippage in ambition and achievement within the school culminating in a RIBA report in 2007 citing the lack of critical thinking among students. A crisis ensued with the future of the school in doubt until the arrival of a new Vice-Chancellor and a decision to rebuild the faculty. Appointments made on foot of this in 2009 included the mandate to establish an identity to the school and to the Masters programme in particular. Given the stabilisation of the political situation in Northern Ireland, opportunities were evolving to develop a wider shared cultural identity where the public realm and architecture might be forum and occasion for such discussion.



In the context of the island of Ireland the cultural dialectic of north and south has been a defining characteristic. Behind the more recent obvious tribal, political, and religious loyalties, is the deeper influence of geography, separateness, and therefore place. The visceral image and narrative of the red hand is a reminder of a particular consciousness of body, matter, presence, and territory.



North and south of the island developed with various political and religious overlays on the geography continuing to distinguish one part of the island from the other. By the nineteenth century Belfast had become the preeminent ship building centre of the world despite the complete absence of local coal or iron. While the south and Dublin were engaged in the celtic and literary revivalism through literature and the imagination, Belfast's Victorian entrepreneurs were making, forging, and building. However it has come about there is a northern sensibility, rooted in place, culture, and most particularly in the shared experience of a landscape.



Most industry is of course gone but the resonances of artefact are real. (*fig.2*) Seamus Heaney's celebration of anvil and axle in *The Forge* could only be penned by a northerner. The tactile, the resonant, and the physical prevail and read relative to a narrative based allegorical tradition that characterises much of southern literature and culture.



1. Today Ulster is even more appealing
Ulster Tourist Development Association, 1960.



2. Seamus Heaney at a turf bog in Bellaghy
Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns
Library, Boston College.

The charge of course being that opportunity to use the lens of one culture to view the other. The implication of the inherited cultural position we find ourselves in, is a hesitation about the purely narrative, the verbal or exclusively intellectual processes; like doubting Thomas we in the north need evidence not talk. This is the context for Architecture at Queens's, an accepted concern for the physical, the artefact, and the empirical.

If this was the cultural territory we would occupy as a school, then the educational ethos was as important. The OECD publication *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and A Well Functioning Society* is an elegant summation; it loosely defines three competencies that might underpin all educational endeavour. In summation they cite the ability to act autonomously, the ability to act in heterogeneous groups, and the ability to use tools interactively. In the particular context we found ourselves in Queen's the first seemed particularly apposite given our own observations and those of the RIBA; the ability of our students to act autonomously has been a mainstay of that which we attempt. By acting autonomously we take to mean engagement leading to informed emotional and intellectual ownership of work.

For us in our attempts to avoid the purely narrative as either impetus or rationalisation, then the connection of representation to individual design processes becomes critical; the parsing of design work through its representation illuminates how the author sees his or her work; this is a defining characterisation of student work. Somewhere in this difficult territory of representation is where intuition comes to play. Hand eye brain sequences have been identified elsewhere and are often discussed, but instinctual responses are not explained by physiological or mechanical sequences. The haptic is more than a matter of nerve ends; emotional engagement is predicated on deeper references.

We have developed our course specific to the context of our school. Alongside the broad landscape of architectural education and studio culture this context includes our school's geographical and cultural position, it's structure and maturity as an institution, it's position within a larger department of engineering, and the courses graduation in recognition from a bachelors degree to a taught masters. And finally, of greatest importance, are our inherited cohort of students and staff composed predominantly of full time academic researchers with some newly appointed part time practitioners. This context did not lend itself to the customary division into units based on differing positions, rather we felt that a pluralistic approach with time to determine ones own within a single diverse studio was more appropriate. The Masters programme was consequently organised as a four semester programme over two years with a combined studio in the first and third semesters. This combined studio using the same staff across the across both years, has worked well and in ways that we might not have anticipated. The four semesters also set something up about pace with structured semesters alternating with those less so; a balance of structured shared concerns and personal development.



(fig.3) In our conversations with students we often refer to the idea of the alchemist when we discuss how they might find the position by which they develop their masters thesis. In particular with reference to the image by Joseph Wright Derby, titled *The Alchemist Discovering Phosphorous*. The glow of the excited phosphorous and the romantic chaos of the laboratory embody our ambition for the studio atmosphere in the school. However of even greater importance is the supposed narrative behind this large canvas. The alchemist, Henning Brandt, is depicted in a moment of surprised joy, perhaps later replaced by disappointment, as his experiment to discover gold by boiling urine accidentally creates phosphorous. In this manner much happens within the architecture studio with intuition, energy, and risk by accident. An alchemy of sorts. It is a place where clear intentions are subverted by careful accidents. This is a messy process and one that is difficult to timetable.



Essential to this process is the careful consideration of time. It is intended that our four semester structure establishes a studio that facilitates risk and experimentation where incidents intended or accidental develop towards a position. In a similar spirit the film work of Swiss artists Fischli & Weiss titled *The Way Things Go* or *Der Lauf der Dinge* describes the nature of the students action in the studio. The film, perhaps made famous in the “Cog” add for Honda cars, is a game of comedic dominos where very ordinary things, ladders, trash bags, old shoes, are set on an extended chain reaction of miraculous cause and effect. Ultimately the film is charged with contingency and entropy, – perhaps another sort of alchemy, and a unique understanding of time and process. The result is a grand performance of mischief, humor and experimentation that describes the spirit of studio practice where ideas, anticipated and unexpected, combine with material exercises and a process occurs mysteriously and often apparently independent of self control.



In response to this spirit our taught masters programme alternates between periods of tight and slack time. The tight time of the first and third semesters are vertical projects where both years work together intensively on a project in the studio. The focus of this project is deceptively limiting in an effort to disarm the student from what is anticipated. To date we have built these projects around simple spatial concerns such as zenithal light, stair rooms (fig.4) and this year elaborated windows. These semesters begin with simple precedent studies published as a catalogue book followed by intense briefs delivering essential components of the course. In parallel to this studio project the first year students are developing their dissertations while the second year students are engaged in a series of exercises, tutorials and seminars that aim to develop the position emergent in their work thus far towards a culminating thesis project proposal, in these writing is used to aid reflection, as a place to discover and develop ideas which are subsequently to be explored in the studio. The following semester of slack reflective time the studio separates into years 1 & 2. Following

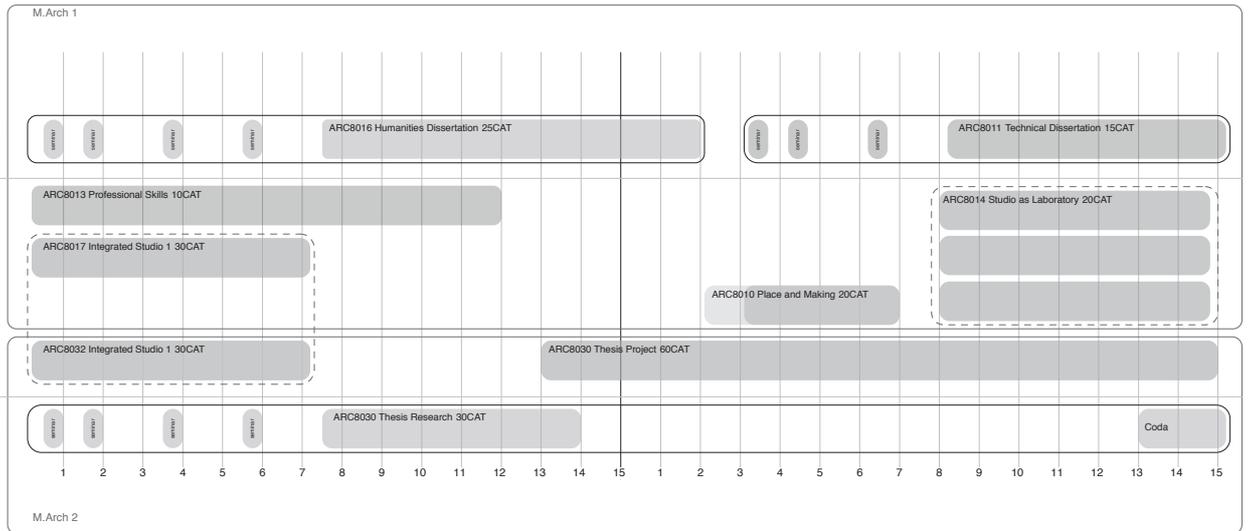


3. Joseph Wright Derby, titled *The Alchemist Discovering Phosphorous*.



Stair Rooms
Queens Architectural Press

4. Students Study Model, Viipuri Library Alvar Aalto, Stair Rooms, Queens Architectural Press.



5. Course structure.





6. Student Project, Photomontage, Belfast & the Uncanny, Catherine Blaney.

One way of expressing this is to view architecture education as having elements of that of a craft. Like a craft there are formal exercises to be undertaken, core skills and competencies to be acquired and standards to be met. Above these however there is also a value system to be adopted, one that edits the world and allows someone to operate with clarity. For many student architects the first steps towards this are the adoption through imitation of another's value system. The progression from imitation to nuanced independence informed by the broader culture of architecture is a core process.

As practitioners we are keenly aware of the opaque nature by which a position is achieved and advanced. Without love of the subject it is almost impossible. It is something stumbled towards with work methodology, intuition and judgement as a guide, recognised not in advance, but in a moment or with the backward looking gaze. Indeed there is much in what we have just described about the operation of the Masters which was achieved in just this manner.

This aspect of architecture is not one that can be taught in the strict sense of the word, but it can be learned if the circumstances are correct. It is the creation and fostering of these circumstances that we see as our primary role as educators. So the thesis for most of our students is rarely one project as such but a process borne across a series of works, incorporating failure as well as success. Despite the risks attendant it is important that the student progresses not in fear, but with curiosity, trusting that the action will eventually yield results. Key to this for us is the idea of points of recognition. These are moments when the student recognises something in their own work, or the educator recognises something in the student. They cannot be programmed for, they are discoveries that given adequate time will be made. Sometimes they prove to be merely patterns in the mist, sometimes they prove more substantial and give more purchase. Critical is that in the moment of recognition a resonance wider than the issue being discussed is established. With experience the process clarifies but the first steps must be supported and tended.

Case Study 1 – Catherine Blaney (fig.6)

Catherine came to us with great energy and no little skill. In her written dissertation she stumbled across the key to unlock her engagement with her own city, Belfast and by extension a means of operation more generally. The dissertation, entitled *Belfast and the Uncanny* encompassed a highly edited photographic essay of what Catherine termed Belfast's self harming tendency, the act of continual self demolition it has been engaged in for most of the last 40 years. Lacking the economic impetus to fill the vacant sites Belfast serves up a rich range of wasteland, brownfield and derelict structures. Catherine's photographs, closely focussed on the scarred ends and boundaries of these conditions was fused with a written essay on Ernst Jensch and Sigmund Freud's read of the uncanny to offer a critique of these conditions as a psychological condition on an urban scale. The studio



project during this time, based in Berlin was not a primary concern and was passed off. In the semester that followed a tightly structured brief was set concerned with the interior world of a Belfast city block.. Here Catherine subverted the overt goal of the project with her emergent aesthetic concern. Here the scarred edges were turned in on themselves, made spatial. In this image her mother occupies the internalised exterior of Catherine’s project, the act perhaps of this architect beginning to find something worth saying about Belfast in her architecture.



7. Student Project, Photograph, Stone Wall, Inis Oirr.



This observation was built upon in Catherine’s culminating project which uses a diverse range of techniques to make physical her read of belfast. Walks in the city prompted reflection and discovery, including of the telling read of correlation between subterranean rivers, the sites of early industries and their later abandonment and current manifestation as interface areas and peace walls.

This observation lead her to this site at the mouth of one of these rivers, and the site of the original ford around which the city was based. Today an empty lot, to catherine it was a place rich in potential. Found artefacts of demolished structure coupled with a literal and metaphorical archaeology produced a terrain she occupied with scenarios, propositions and spatial experiment. These accreted into the form of the Polis House, a second chamber for northern irelands nascent parliament. Incorporating souterrains, secret archives, interrogation rooms confessional boxes and shared forums and theatres this building comprises her dream – read of her place made concrete.



Case Study 2 – Laura O’Gorman (fig.7)

Laura took a different tack. Building from an engagement with a place she knew well, the island of Inis Oirr off the west coast of Ireland Laura produced a written dissertation and paralell drawn research. Here a particular strength was identified, her ability to insert herself bodily into a situation in order to understand it. Inis Oirr is typically treated as archaeology, or geology, a picturesque accumulation of walls that speak of a past long gone. Laura saw it differently and lived with a family on the island for a summer. During this she immersed herself in their life and rhythms.



At first she was interested in the walls themselves and this is what became the subject of her dissertation, mapping and recording generations of wall making by one family and an in-depth study of the walls constructed by the current generation. She combined this with a study of the stone, its properties and order, and observed that there is much beyond utility in the walls. There is ritual, order and aesthetics at play. Laura in a way is a biographer in her work, drawing it from a deep read of another individual. It was not until her culminating project that this became apparent however. Here, a year later she returned to Inis Oirr, and Padraic, and started by taking three weeks to make this drawing of part of his holding. It was in this that the critical observation was made – that the island is composed not of walls, but of fields and in this was the permission to engage in the productive reconstruction of this man made landscape.

