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The Idea of the Common: A Pedagogical Assessment of a Graduate Architecture Seminar in Dublin, Ireland

Samantha Leah Martin-McAuliffe

Abstract

Public space—its history, uses and especially design—lies at the heart of the architectural curriculum. Yet defining this term can be a slippery task: what are we alluding to, specifically, when we speak of public space? Is it an idea, a phenomenon, a distinct place that can be drawn, measured and plotted? In the formal academic discipline of architecture, we freely use and apply this expression and its cognates to a multitude of situations, but we seldom pause to consider, much less scrutinize, its underlying meaning. This essay explores the conundrum of “concretizing” public space through the lens of a graduate seminar. The seminar aims to develop a series of lucid and balanced dialogues pertaining to commonality in the city.

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it...[T]he public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. (58)

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Public Space and the Architecture Curriculum

Public space—its history, uses, and especially design—lies at the heart of the architectural curriculum. Emerging practitioners typically learn about the deep-seated significance of public space through courses in the history and theory of architecture, in particular within lectures considering the evolution of cities and urbanism. This acquired knowledge then serves as a platform for engagement with public space through the vehicle of the design studio. From the outset of their training, architecture students are asked to think “outside the box” quite literally, that is, to be considerate of how their designs for buildings participate with their settings and the immediate spaces that surround them. Moreover, in the present day, an architecture brief is just as likely to require the design of a common and social setting as a building in the old-fashioned, conventional sense. Put categorically, architecture students implicitly understand their central role in the design and planning of public space. Yet defining this term can be a slippery task: what are we alluding to, specifically, when we speak of public space? Is it an idea, a phenomenon, a distinct place that can be drawn, measured, and plotted? In the formal academic discipline of architecture, we freely use and apply this expression and its cognates to a multitude of situations, but we seldom pause to consider, much less scrutinize, its underlying meaning. Securing an absolute or concrete definition of public space is an insurmountable (and arguably fruitless) task, but an incisive examination of its theoretical and spatial applications can reap substantial rewards for students of architecture.

To address this situation at our own institution, we have designed an advanced seminar course for Master of Architecture (M.Arch.) students that examines the origins, ideals, and materiality of commonality in the urban realm. Entitled “The Idea of the Common,” this seminar, which is held both on-site and in the classroom in Ireland, aims to develop a series of lucid and balanced dialogues pertaining to commonality. Using a principal thoroughfare in the historic core of Dublin as a case-study site, our course follows a two-fold trajectory: students are asked to utilize their design skills to produce diagrams that communicate their own investigations into phenomena—formal and informal, large and small scale, permanent and transitory—within the study site; beyond this, a series of key readings on the public realm are assigned to help the students productively extend their concrete observations. These form the basis of seminar discussions and they support further independent student research. All members of the seminar are then required to complete interdisciplinary essays that fuse their very particular explorations of Dublin with wider studies and concerns about the role of public space in cities. What follows in this essay is a review of the seminar’s pedagogical program, including an annotated selection of student diagrams.

Setting Out

The overarching intention of “The Idea of the Common” seminar is to clarify the ways by which urban public space is *claimed*—occupied, passed through, ordered, described, depicted, and diagrammed. A series of open-ended questions are presented to the students at the very start of the course, and these subsequently serve as anchor points for discussions throughout the semester: how can we move from an abstract understanding of public space to something that is concrete and specific? Which every day, ordinary places in the city provide structure and give order to our lives? In what ways can we reconcile architectural monumentality and the commonplace?

In order to lend specificity to and gain purchase on these broad questions, we utilize a very familiar and well-trodden thoroughfare in Dublin—Dame Street to College Green—as a case-study site (Fig. 1). This route was chosen for a number of reasons: as a main artery in the historic quarter of the city’s south side, it has witnessed and continues to be a focal point for gatherings and activities of all types, from the prosaic to the truly historic. For instance, this was one of the principal thoroughfares through which John F. Kennedy’s motorcade passed during his visit to Dublin in 1963. Similarly, in 2011, Barak Obama spoke on College Green to an assembled crowd of over 25,000, and every March the St. Patrick’s Day parade processes around College Green and up Dame Street before heading toward St. Patrick’s Cathedral.



Fig. 1. View east, down Dame Street toward College Green. In the middle ground, at the right margin of the street stands Dublin City Hall. The tallest building depicted, the modern hipped-roof structure in the middle of the image, is the Central Bank of Ireland, 2016. Photo credit: S. L. Martin-McAuliffe.

Importantly, a number of open spaces, such as plazas and squares, as well as formal gateways and forecourts, stand contiguous to this thoroughfare and make important contributions to the streetscape. In October of 2011, one of these spaces, the plaza outside of the Central Bank of Ireland, became the site of the Occupy Dame Street protest (Fig. 2). Finally, the conduit itself is bookended by historic institutions that are not only significant to Dublin but also to Ireland as a whole. The Bank of Ireland (formerly Houses of Parliament) and Trinity College Dublin stand at the foot of College Green in the east and Christchurch Cathedral as well as Dublin City Hall (originally the Royal Exchange) crown the top of the thoroughfare in the west (Fig. 3, 4, and 5). Together, these manifold attributes of the street, both tangible and intangible, create conditions and possibilities for a compelling study of public space.



Fig. 2. Plaza of the Central Bank of Ireland on Dame Street, view east. College Green begins further east where the cluster of large trees can be seen in the center-background of the photo, 2016. Photo credit: S. L. Martin-McAuliffe.



Fig. 3. College Green, view east. The Bank of Ireland (formerly Houses of Parliament) and its monumental forecourt stand at the left and Trinity College Dublin fills the background, 2016. Photo credit: S. L. Martin-McAuliffe.



Fig. 4. Dublin City Hall (originally the Royal Exchange), viewed from the north along Dame Street, which continues into Lord Edward Street, 2016. Photo credit: S. L. Martin-McAuliffe.



Fig. 5. Christchurch Cathedral, view from southeast, 2016. Photo credit: S.L. Martin-McAuliffe.

It is crucial to underscore that “The Idea of the Common” seminar does not attempt to write a canonical history of this urban conduit. Rather, the course considers how College Green and Dame Street, as well as their attendant open spaces, contribute to the urban order of Dublin. This approach encompasses an understanding of the corridor’s architecture and design, but it also importantly sheds light on conditions and characteristics of the street that are fleeting, intangible and sometimes even ambiguous.

The Observational Analysis

There are two key assignments that take place during the semester, the first of which is entitled the “Observational Analysis.” This is a short written and diagrammatic essay that is rooted in close and careful observation. The members of the class are grouped in pairs and each set of students is assigned a particular topic relating to the urban corridor of Dame Street and College Green. The topics for this assignment encompass both formal and informal movements, such as waiting and loitering, spectacles and parades, protests, patterns of commerce and finally quotidian activities associated with banking (Dame Street is also the historical banking district for the city). Fundamentally, the task of the essay is simple: to describe, in clear and honest writing, the character and qualities of this place with reference to the specific terms of the given topic. Although some topics may well include references and consideration of past events, for example the cavalcade or speech of a visiting US president, students are reminded that they are not being asked to write a historical essay in the

conventional sense. Rather, they are required to provide an attentive, visual analysis of the conditions of Dame Street and College Green, and this can only be accomplished by visiting and spending time on site. In other words, each student must patiently *habituate* this urban corridor well enough to become a kind of ambassador for it. In addition to their on-site analyses, students are required to reflect upon a selection of texts that consider the public realm, such as work by Hannah Arendt, Richard Sennett, Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl and Aristotle. The final essay must take into account both the tangible (such as architectural forms, spatial contexts, and building materials) and especially the immaterial or transient qualities of the assigned topic. The written component of the essay is supported by student-authored visual diagrams that communicate the main points and findings. In fact, these diagrams, a selection of which are illustrated here, are considered the driving force behind the arguments of the essays (Figs 6-7).

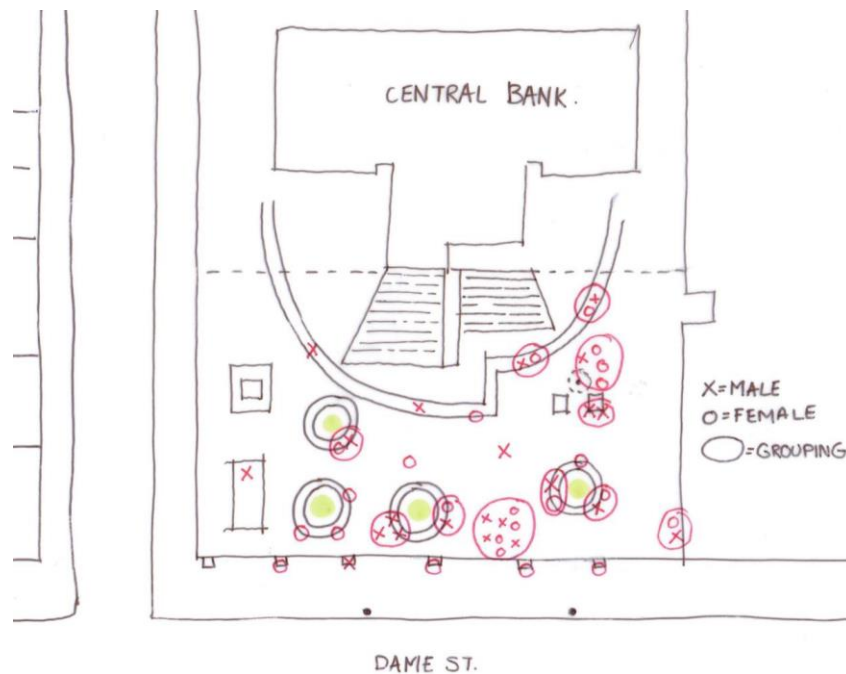


Fig. 6. One study of waiting focused on the plaza in front of the Central Bank on Dame Street during a weekday evening. This diagram shows patterns of people sitting within the square. This study was produced in tandem with an analysis of sunlight as well as a study of the principal pedestrian routes across the square at the same time, 2016. Source: C. O'Sullivan.

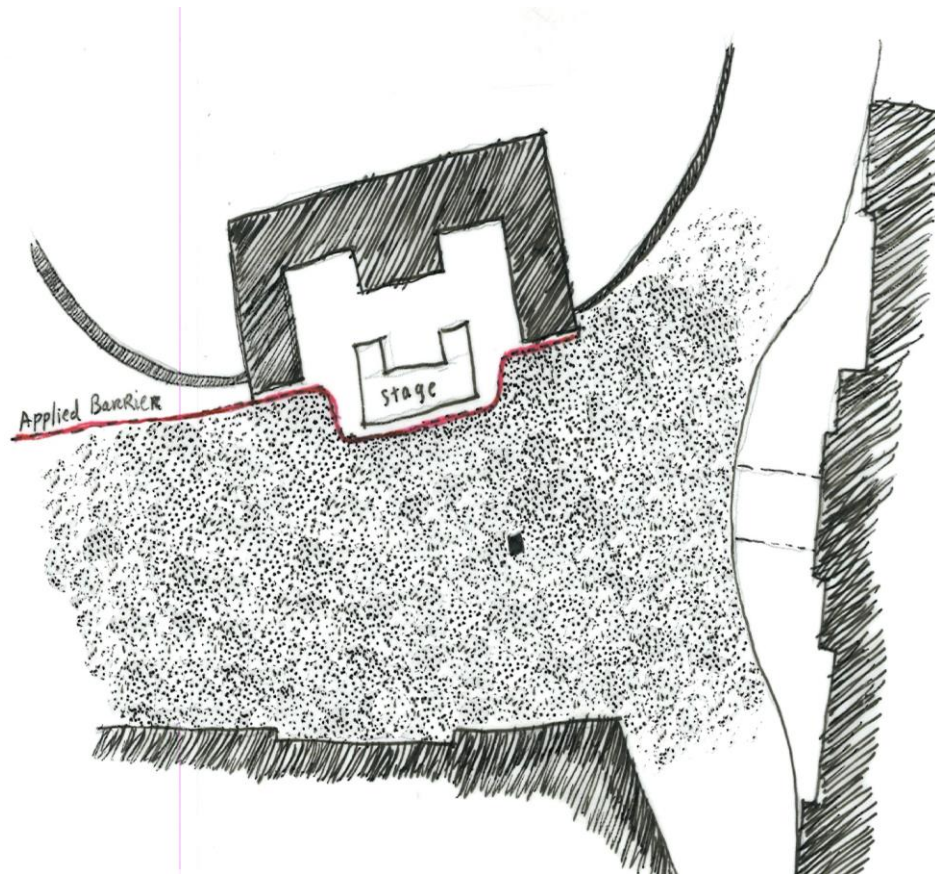


Fig. 7. Diagram of human occupation of College Green during a speech in the forecourt of the Bank of Ireland. This study examines how pedestrian traffic molds to the particular shape and volume of Dame Street and College Green depending on the type of event being held, 2016. Source: R. Feeley.

The Visual Essay

There is already an institutional mode present in the way we greet each other in the street. (6)
A. Honneth (H. Steiner, trans.)

The word *institution*, especially in contemporary Ireland, tends to elicit images of grim, windowless compounds; places removed from society at large and bereft of empathy. However, one of the overall purposes of “The Idea of the Common” seminar is to exonerate, even resuscitate, this term, especially with regard to the common realm. Understanding the intrinsic meaning of institution can lead us to a more lucid reading of the city. It does not take that much effort to begin unpacking the word institution and reappraising its basic significance. A quick perusal through the OED yields an array of meanings we tend to overlook: organization, association, practice, custom, convention and habit. Notably, as mentioned earlier, the corridor of Dame Street and College Green is bracketed and buttressed by important historic institutions: primarily Christchurch Cathedral, City Hall and Trinity College Dublin but also the Bank of Ireland. The Central Bank, although a much more recent addition to this roll call of institutions, could be included here; it was built in 1980. In his article, “Type, Field, Culture, Praxis,” Peter Carl argues that institutions of this kind – what he refers to as ‘formal institutions’ – are not only important for their typicality, but that they also are responsible for an underlying order of the city and culture as a whole (Carl 38-45). It is from this perspective that our students are encouraged to assess the public spaces of Dame Street and College Green.

The second principal assignment of this seminar is generally referred to as the “Visual Essay” and as such it focuses on a visual presentation. Here each student is required to choose one of the key institutions on Dame Street mentioned above and analyze its contribution to the order of the street. Similar to the Observational Analysis, this assignment places value on the student authored illustrations and diagrams that communicate an overall argument. The group is encouraged to consider both the metaphorical and literal (spatial) presence of these key institutions in Dublin. For example, while the cathedral may well embody religious authority in the city, the building itself also contributes to and serves as a backdrop for the public realm of the street on a daily basis. Moreover, it is likely that its architecture embodies certain characteristics and qualities that are typical of religious institutions. The premise of this assignment rests in the hypothesis that the characteristics of these buildings are important to how we interpret, read and take part in the urban realm that surrounds them. Furthermore, part of understanding the role of these places is to take account of their reciprocity with other organizations. Thus, an essay that focuses on Dublin City Hall also needs to investigate the relationship of this building with Christchurch and Trinity College Dublin. Interestingly, many students, having investigated their specific institution, decided to focus on just one element of the site – forecourt, entrance, or singular viewpoint. Thus, by the second half of the semester, most, if not all, students were examining their site from the particular to the universal (Figs 8-10).



Fig. 8. An initial study diagram of the principal viewpoints toward the Royal Exchange (now Dublin City Hall). Here, Dame Street is the wide thoroughfare running through the middle of the map, 2016. Source: M. McDonagh.

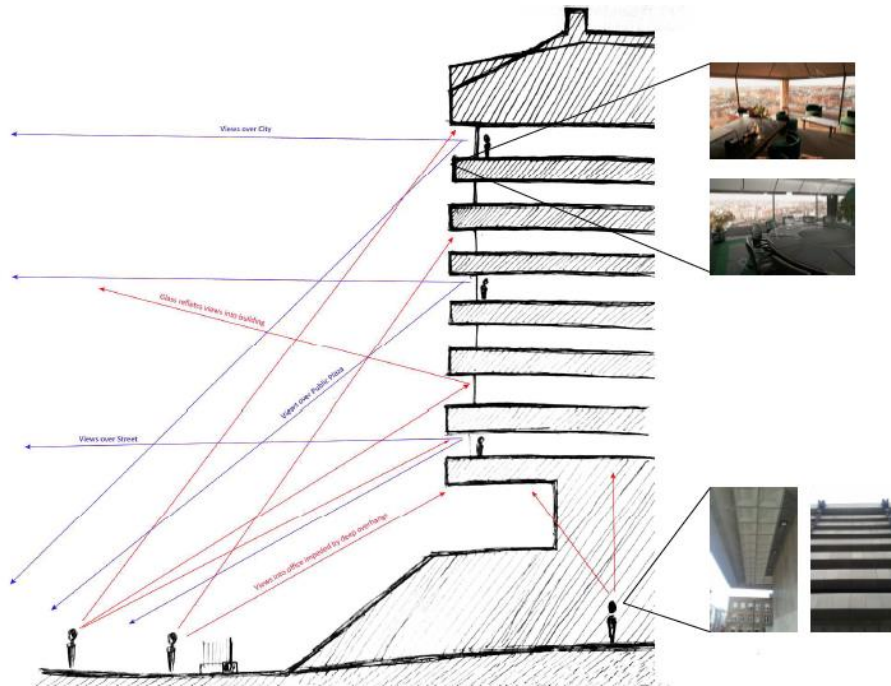


Fig. 9. In an essay considering how the Central Bank of Ireland on Dame Street exercises influence over the public realm, a student produced a series of studies examining viewpoints, both literal and figurative. This diagram shows an analysis of the different types and kinds of views enabled from within the Central Bank itself in contrast to its plaza at street level, 2016. Source: V. Carron.

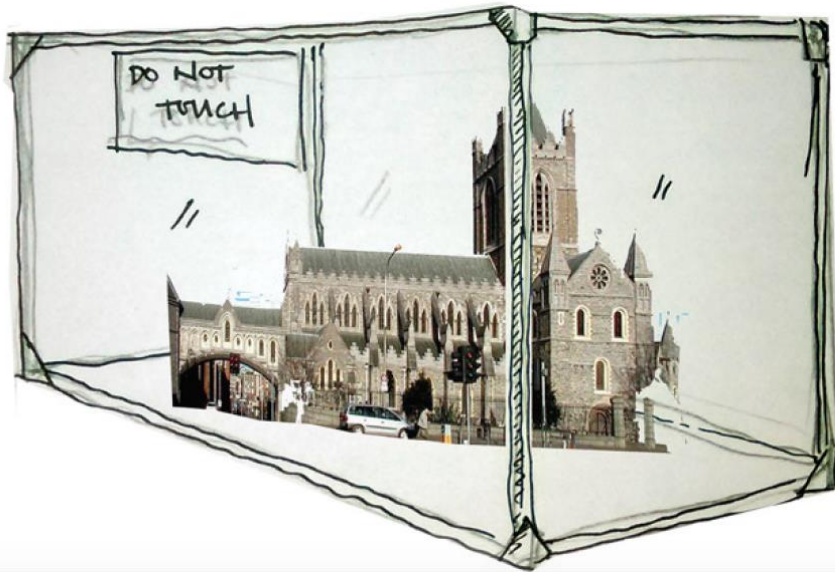


Fig. 10. Although Christchurch Cathedral is presently one of the most accessible of the public institutions on the corridor (the Central Bank is nearly impossible to access), it remains a building that seems out of touch, distant. This sketch conveys the degree to which Christchurch is interpreted as a “relic” in the city fabric, and thus is also removed from the quotidian activities of the urban sphere, 2016. Source: F. Kenny.

Conclusion: No Cul-de-Sac

Many of the broad questions raised at the very start of our seminar would remain unanswered by the conclusion of the semester. Yet this was purely intentional, as it was assumed that most of these open-ended inquiries would serve as the impetus for further, more abstract and complex debates. Ultimately, this pedagogical strategy was key to the development of the course. Perhaps one of the most compelling outcomes of the “Idea of the Common” seminar was the degree to which students reappraised, scrutinized and finally explained, through their own words and images, facets of the street that they take for granted. Because Dame Street and College Green are so familiar, so routine, they are hard to see plain. Unlike the tourists who witness the grand colonnades of the Bank of Ireland and the entrance to Trinity College for the first time, Dubliners have difficulty perceiving these places anew. For students of architecture, this situation is perhaps compounded by the fact that such buildings and their attendant spaces have already been studied in a formal, academic sense. Hence, there is a tendency to register their significance to the urban realm in an automatic fashion: they are acknowledged as respected, historic structures, and yet they are seldom the focus of innovative, perceptive studies in the present day. If, as result of this seminar, our students are galvanized to re-evaluate and be more concrete in how they describe public space in their own design projects, then the course will have served its purpose.

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