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Street Life, how to study it and improve it

Case Study 4

Dr Miriam Fitzpatrick

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Miriam Fitzpatrick is an urbanist with a specialism in the micro-analysis of urban open space. With twenty years in international architectural practice, a masters degree from the LSE in City Design, and a Ph.D. from UCD, she has developed the discipline of Urban Design at UCD since 2006 motivating students from across the school to nurture their curiosity about urban design, connecting their skills from visual thinking to academic writing, and encouraging a sense of social responsibility. She was shortlisted for Teaching Excellence award in 2020.

Outline

Title	**Street Life, how to study it and improve it**
Abstract	This module is an introduction to the principles of urban design with a focus on improving street life. The challenge in the second year of this pilot (2020 to 2021) was to imagine more liveable urban places post-pandemic. Based on lectures on urban design and research methods in observation, students documented life on a street within easy reach of their home during lockdown and gained agency by their detailed observations and suggestions for design interventions from their close-in view. The module performed a dual role: to gain understanding of how to make public space more accessible while also making the module more inclusive.
Module Name	ARCT40160 Introduction to Urban Design
Discipline	Architecture, Urban Design, Landscape Architecture
Level	Level 4, 5 credits
Student numbers	30-40

Introduction and Context

'If your heart doesn't break at the state of urban society in the world today, then stop reading now. This is for those who want to make a big difference but don't know where to start. Because even though the difference-makers didn't get us into this mess, we are the ones with the drive and belief to get us out of it.' (Campbell, 2018, p.5)

This quote is by urban designer Kelvin Campbell and sets a challenge that my module on street life seeks to address; curiosity and agency. Understanding the delicate balance of engaging across scales is a core challenge for designers, so the module aims to familiarise students with ways of looking closely at the city, while also taking account of a range of placemaking tactics and theoretical perspectives in order to help them gain insights and find agency in improving urban open space.

I have been curious about how public space can enhance inclusivity and how small-signals of exclusion can impact a sense of conviviality in urban places. So when the Inclusive Teaching Pilot was offered at UCD I was intrigued as I foresaw an opportunity to learn new pedagogical tactics and the potential to embed my research into my teaching.

Figure 1. 'Chairs enlarge choice.' (Hyatt, 1980) To the credit of urbanist William Holly Whyte (the subject of my current research) Bryant Park in New York is home to over 4,000 movable chairs (and 1,000 tables): a testimony to the value he placed upon small choices - like where to sit - to the overall sociability of urban open spaces. Source: Photo of Movable chairs for children in Bryant Park by author.

I was researching the extent to which choice in the design of public space could enhance inclusivity so the objectives of the Pilot to widen participation and increase engagement were wonderfully in sync (Fitzpatrick, 2019). I had been inspired by UCL's Prof. Dilly Fung's research on the subject of 'Embedding Research In Teaching,' and presented on this subject to the Professional Certificate and Diploma Programmes in University Teaching and Learning students so participating in the Pilot Project seemed like a chance to go a step further and improve my knowledge of teaching strategies for inclusivity. My interest was piqued by our first workshop as a Pilot Group held in January 2020. It prompted me to reflect on the possibility that if the design of space can have unintended consequences for end users, might the design of my module have unintended consequences for learners?.

My pedagogical approach is to regard teaching as a social act. I therefore designed our classes to include opportunities for exchange, engagement with diverse thinkers in urban design and for reflection. This interest in shared learning comes from a professional experience in international architectural and urban design practices, where differences in perspectives are valued. But the pilot gave me tactics to make this object more embedded pedagogically.

The OED describes perspectivism as 'the practice of regarding and analysing a situation, work of art, etc., from different points of view and on different levels'.

'....by perspective I do not only mean its literal meaning - that is how we see - but also how we understand' (Westin, 2014).

In this quest, I have been influenced by the sociologist C Wright Mill's suggestion for a Sociological Imagination of 'thinking in a variety of viewpoints because the mind becomes a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible' (Mills, 1959). My research interest in feminist pedagogy added other dimensions. From feminist geographers in particular, I was interested in what gets missed. Geographer and feminist Gillian Rose influential 1997 essay surveyed the landscape of reflexivity in Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics. According to Rose, research is a two-way flow between the researched and the researcher. The researcher's positionality (in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, sexuality) may influence the data collected and thus the information that becomes coded as knowledge. Rose (1997) explains how 'this transparent self then looks outward, to understand its place in the world, to chart its position in the areas of knowledge production, to see its own place in the relations of power' (p. 306).

A counter tactic is 'To be Able to Image Otherwise'. This is the title of a paper by community archivists Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci and Marika Cifor, whose work speaks to a growing interest in emancipatory action research (Caswell et. al., 2017). I revised my module to draw on some of their ideas of producing knowledge that can empower the researcher and disadvantage people by co-participation (Chuh, 2003).

As a result, I aimed to make more explicit the emancipatory aspect of ethnographic fieldwork for students, for how fieldwork holds the possibility of increasing self-esteem and courage to identify or confront structural sources of marginalization, oppression and exclusion in the design of public space. The aim was that students might come to recognise their own positionality (i.e. how the researcher can impact the research) by asking what they have missed by their initial assumptions.
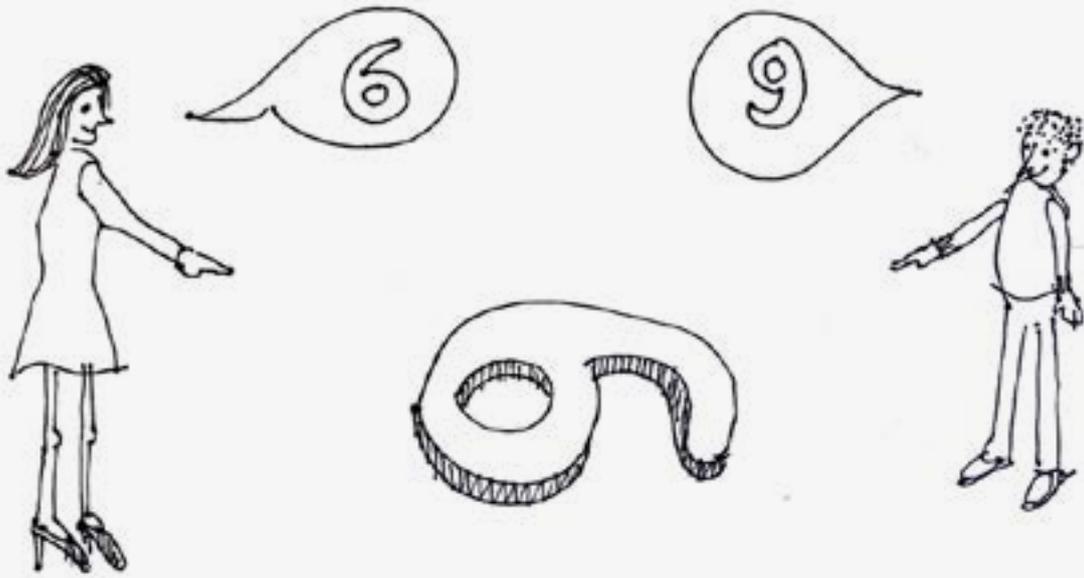
Figure 2. Sketch by author of validity of different vantage points.

Figure 2 sketch aims to capture the validity of different researcher's vantage points. This became a driver for weekly windows into the world, as students presented their street to each other. Using ethnographic methods, they found validity for their view while also discovering new ways to look at streets. By peer-to-peer feedback, they became more aware of what they had missed and in turn their own positionality. Accordingly, by establishing a weekly forum for students to present their street, they were encouraged to find their own voice.

Design and Implementation Description

I developed this module in 2016 for students in the Masters in Urban Design. From 2019, the module was offered as an 'Option/Elective' and so was open to many more courses and as a result, it attracts students from very diverse disciplinary backgrounds. In 2020 to 2021, the class was made up of a third each from a background in Architecture, a new MSc in Architecture, Urbanism and Climate Action, and a third from a mix of Masters or Bachelor in Landscape Architecture. The class included students from North America, EU, UK, South Africa, India and China in a split of just over half females.

I developed a structure of three building blocks, which I related to Roald Dahl's story of 'the Giraffe, and the Pelly and Me'. (It was a nice coincidence that I shared a birthday with Roald Dahl on the first day of the academic year!). Roald Dahl's story is of three intrepid creatures who through shared adventures learn from each other. Representing blocks of different duration, it allowed a way to give a structure to a module that had a changing cohort and focus every year. It also reflected a way to embed a cascade of formative assessments so student input and feedback could be cumulative.

The Giraffe, who is vertically advantaged, offers the distant vantage point of the view from above (overview): Pelly, the pelican, with voluminous beak, walks the field (fieldwork) and captures the idea of city as a repository of urban open space: the third phase focuses on 'Me' and allows time to capture subjective experience and to enhance a personal academic learning journey.
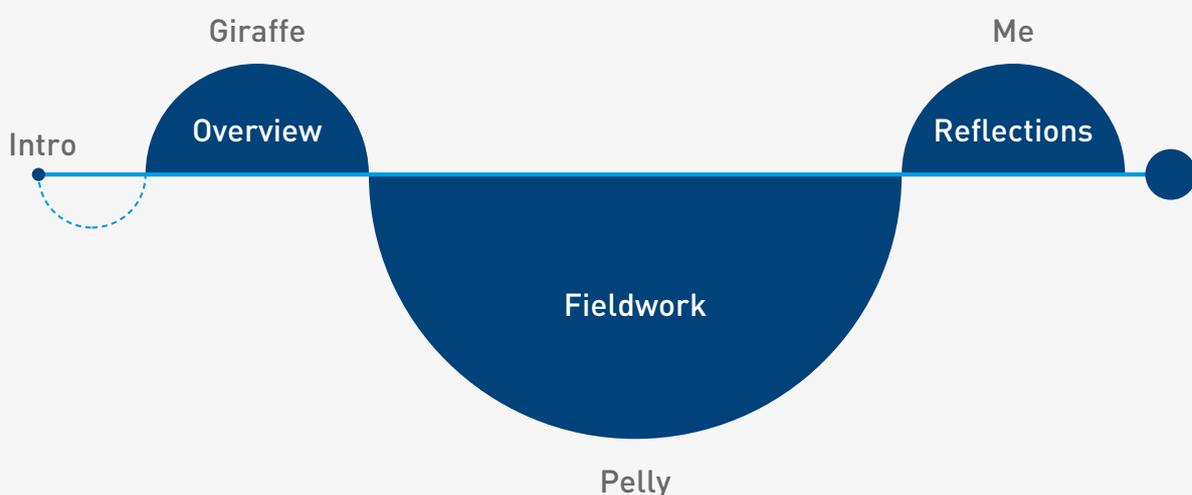

Figure 3. A visual of the module structure over 15 weeks.

The tripartite structure translated into a detailed substructure of content, deadlines for assignments and feedback throughout the module. It also highlighted external activities - made easily accessible via Zoom - to widen our horizons.

Figure 4. My hand-out in week one for feedback on deadlines.

By January 2020, because of participating in this pilot, I had multiple pages of rich student feedback highlighted with a shortlist of identifiable actions and options. Because I ran another module in the second trimester, I was able to test some of the suggestions, an option that turned out to have enormous knock-on benefits given the lockdown mid-way and the switch to emergency remote teaching in March 2020. (More later)

Phase 1, the Giraffe - an Overview

Given the switch to full on-line delivery for 2020 - 2021, for the second year of the pilot, I was ready with new tactics. I posted my introduction lecture on Brightspace to free our first class for more time to 'meet and greet'. The Flipped Classroom eased students into the module as I asked them to be prepared to introduce themselves by a city/town that they loved or to describe where they were spending locked-down. We had 30 cities/town enthusiasts from day one, with students from North America to China, UK to South Africa. It was a great way to begin our venture. They were each the authority on their own place.

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The tripartite structure helped students engage early. The introductory weeks established urban design principles and set out the pedagogical approach for lectures and assignments. I had learnt from student feedback how much they appreciated seeing the best for past work so, with the student's prior agreement, I posted the best assignment from previous years on Brightspace and invited questions in early weeks. The work varied and students appreciate seeing the range as all examples of Grade A work. It assured students that there is no right answer. This year, I also invited a past student to present and answer questions. Both opportunities eliminated some of the challenges of self-sabotage by developing a secure foundation of knowledge and expectations and helped build confidence as it allowed each to feel free to experiment while also developing a deeper understanding.

Because of the earlier experience of lock-down, I had come to recognise that we all needed to feel more in control, given the vagaries of our personal situations. So to start off I expanded on some of the insights I had gained from my evidenced-based teaching approach. I developed a special talk on Self-Paced Learning for the motivational and mental demands of remote working. It focused on time management, placing emphasis on starting on a hill with a tiny task, on visual thinking, and various supports for time-blocking. (I am indebted to UCD for a number of workshops on literacy especially those run by Hugh Kerns on Imposter Syndrome. (His company is www.ithinkwell.com.au)
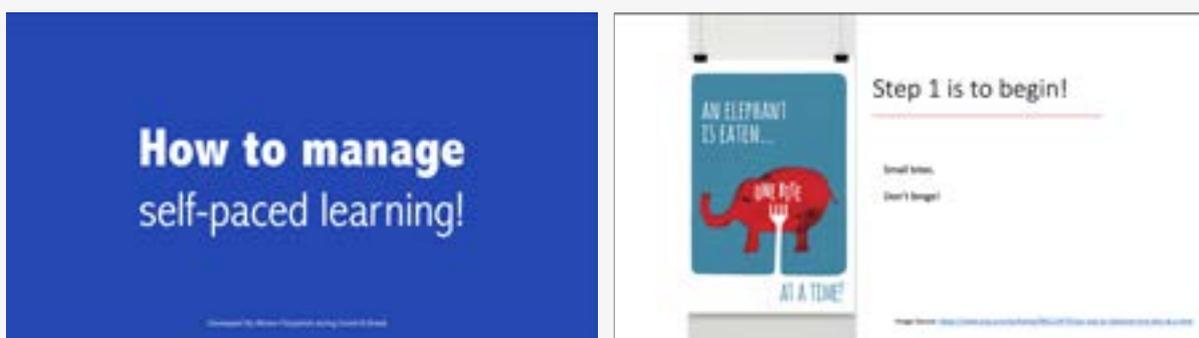

Figure 5 and 6. My Pep-Talk for autonomous learners on time management during Covid19 Lockdown.

I recorded the talk and at various stages of the year, students emailed me as to how valuable the talk was to their studies.

Phase 2 Pelly - Fieldwork

One output was to document streets by comparative analysis and another was to follow up with an in-depth evaluation through fieldwork. I developed a template for students to use.
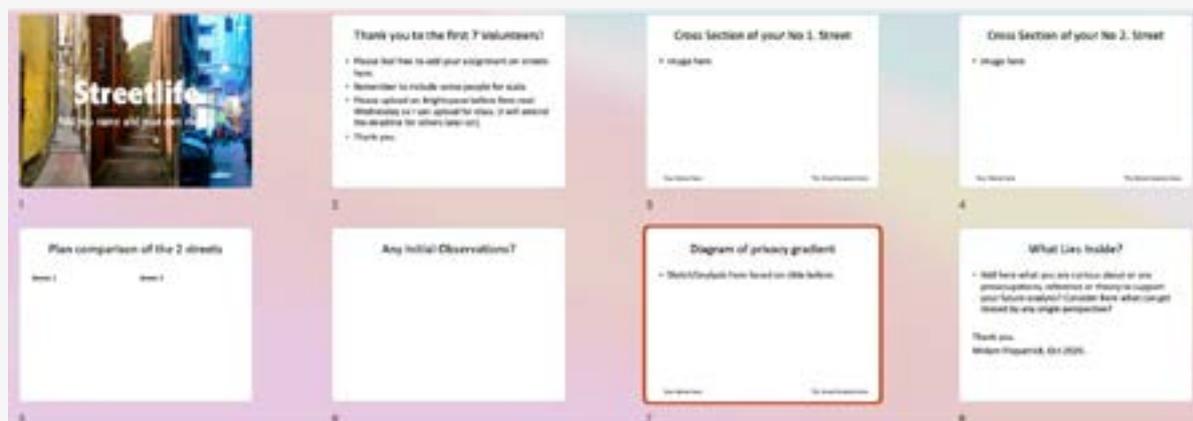
Figure 7. Screenshot of template for street comparison by students.

Typically the fieldwork phase would include lectures on various methods, comparative analysis and trips together to specific places. This had to be altered for Covid19 lock-down. My alternative strategy was that from week 4 to 10, students would provide a window into specifics of their local street. The next images became my index for weekly lectures as every week, it highlighted where we were in the structure. After three opening lectures, in place of fieldwork in the middle section, students were invited to present their street observations for 3 to 5 minutes each. (Week 7 is a review week in studio modules so I scheduled as a 'Golden Week' - to cover of topic of choice so attendance is maintained; this year was on 'Reclaiming the Street for Pedestrians').
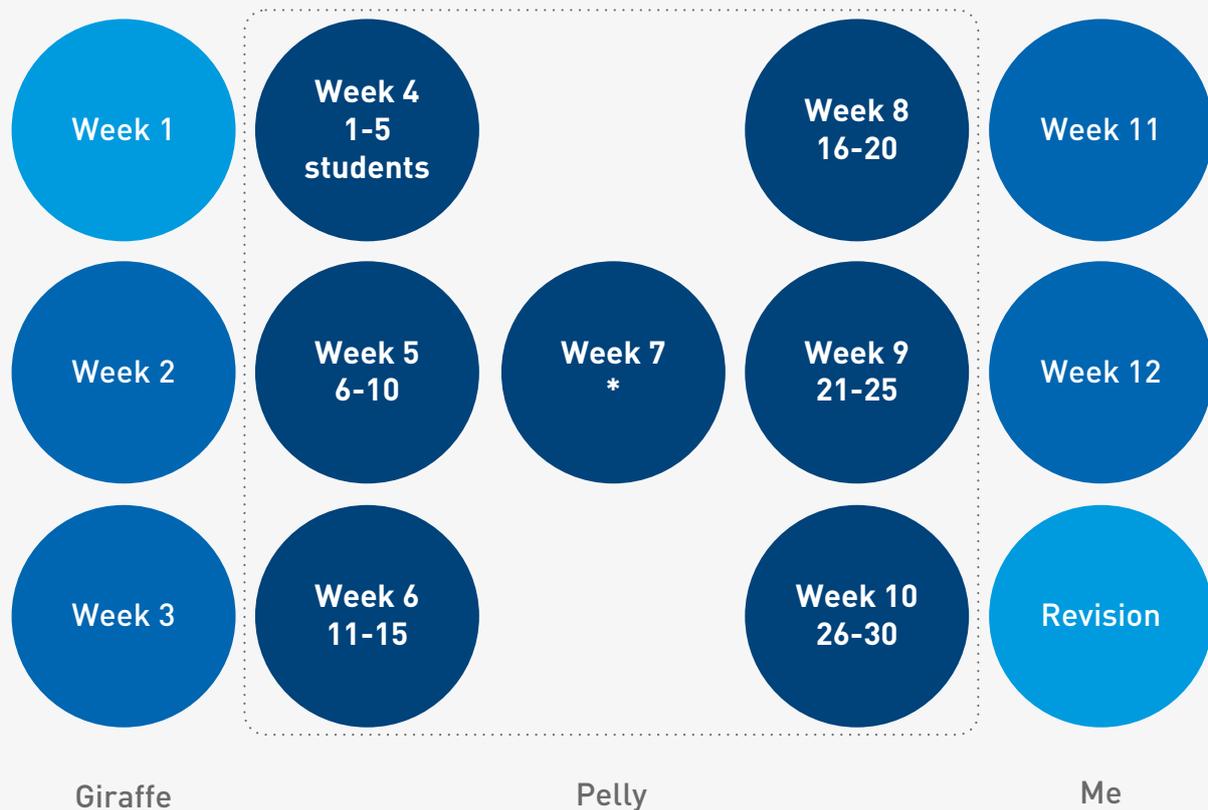
Figure 8. My index/aide memoire of the module structure.

Each week, while we were in lock-down, we managed to travel by these windows into streets worldwide. Designed as a strategy to manage the absence of shared fieldwork, the results were remarkable for their diversity and for class engagement. Here are a few examples:

Figure 9. Street section by student Emer Martin
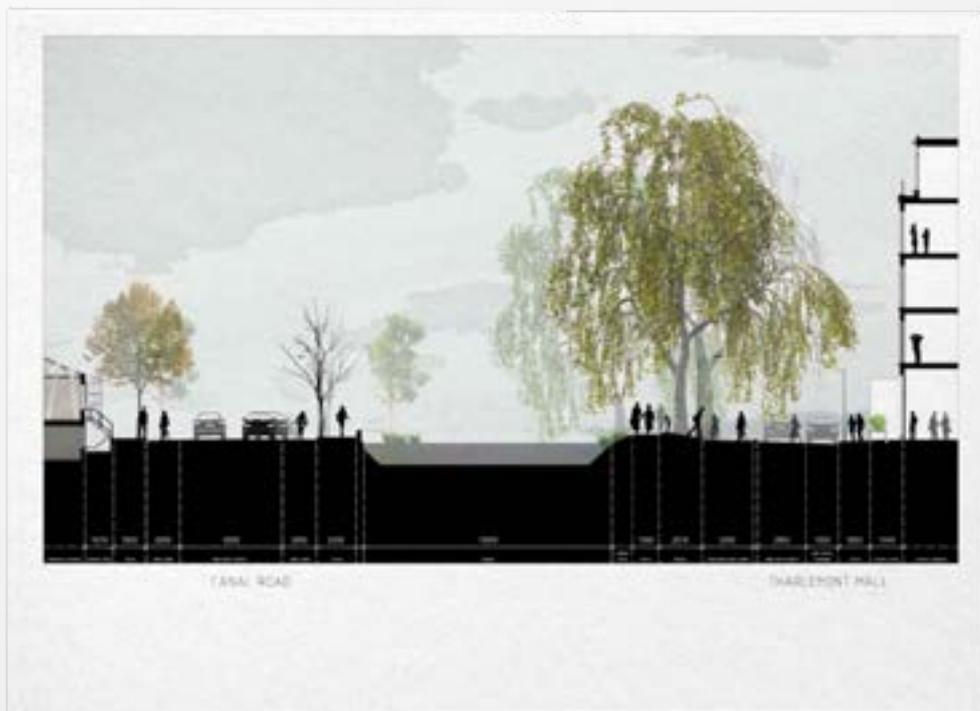
Figure 10. Street section by student Alice Bowler

Figure 11. Street section by student Jennifer Breslin
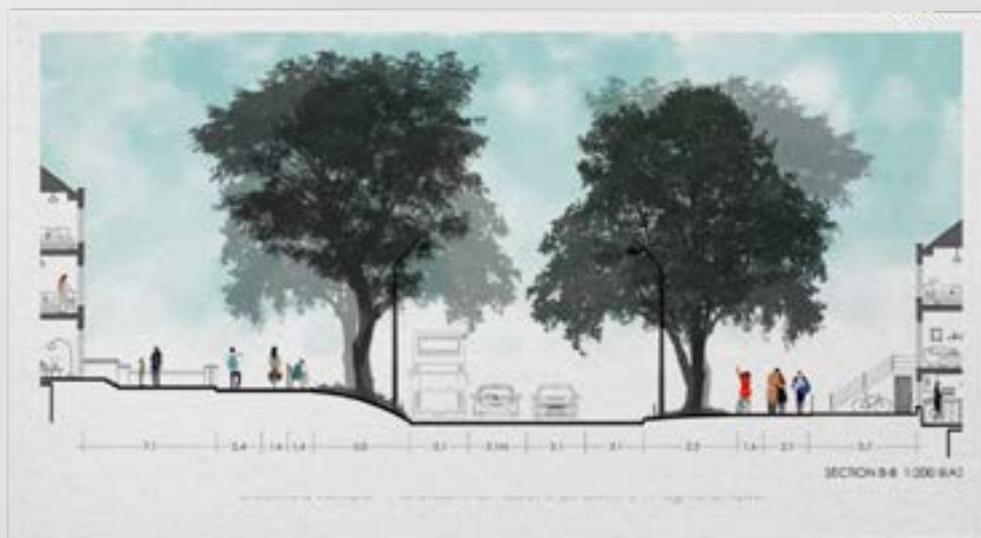
Figure 12. Street section by student Polina Suliana

We travelled from streets in America to China, from Ireland via Europe to South Africa. The work was exemplary and discussions inquisitive and lively. In the spirit of inclusivity, all the results from this assignment have been captured by a student-assembled website on Street Life www.ucdarch.com/street-life One student submitted a video of her street, which captured its life better than the cross sections so I will develop this method in future years.

After repeat visits to their streets, students gained agency as they came to identify what did not work and small changes which could make their street more convivial, more accessible, more enjoyable as a place to walk, to live, or a place to sit and wait.

Phase 3 Me, Academic writing skills

My pedagogical aim is to motivate students to nurture their curiosity about urban design, encourage a sense of social responsibility, and connect their skills from visual thinking to academic writing . Accordingly, I allowed time in the schedule to focus on the student's learning mode, academic writing skills, and reflections. One assignment I have developed for literacy skills is the book review when students read from a range of preselected texts on streets. As some students in Architecture favour visualization and sketching, I emphasised transferring this organizational skill for their essay structures. Some students continue to complete their capstone dissertation with me and I found over the years that for students with dyslexia, this method can be liberating. Why so? Bong Joon Ho, the Director of 'Parasite' storyboards his entire film before he rolls the camera. He does not shoot master shots: he shoots his storyboards. The first step of the review was to capture its structure visually. Here is an example:

Figure 13. Diagram of Book Structure – 'Street Design: the secret to great towns and cities'
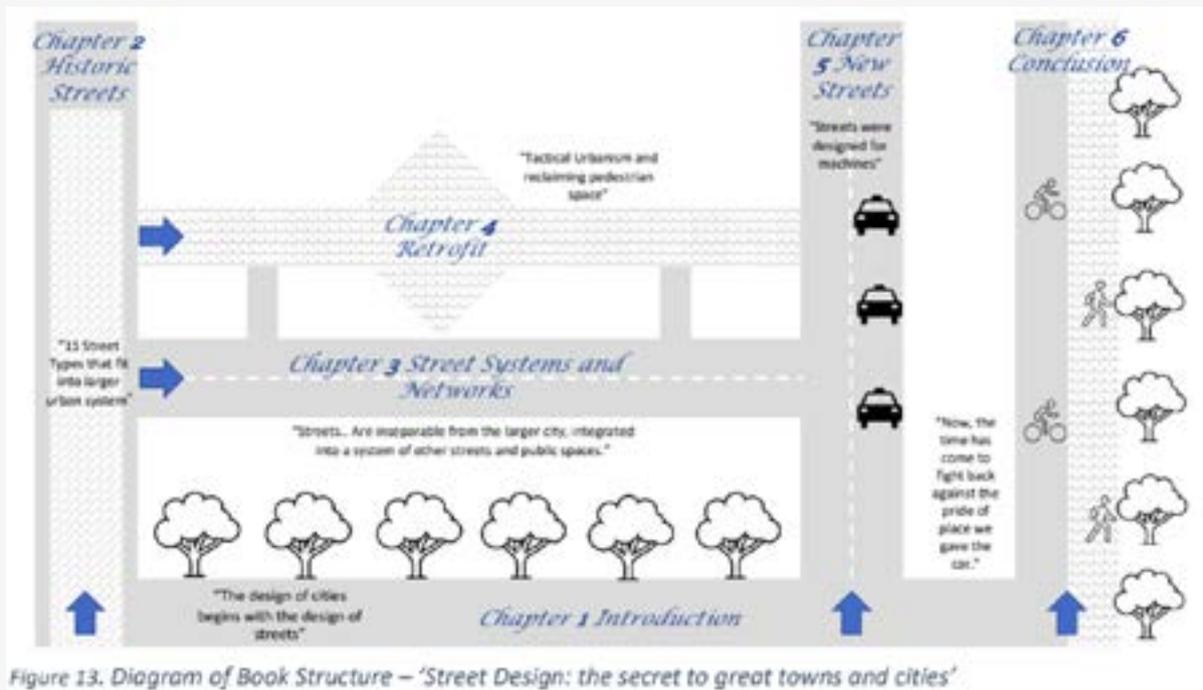
Figure 13. Visual of Book Review by student Hannah Jordan

With a graphic of an essay's structure, design students can be freer to 'shoot' and write: they can also use this prop or infographic, to share their enthusiasm for a chosen book with their peers. But the method was not only applicable to a book review: it can scale up to plan an essay and later a dissertation. A few students availed of the Optional Assignments for the final essay and submitted very creative responses. This is an example of one who submitted a visual in place of a written book review:

Figure 14. Visual as an alternative to a book review by student Stephen Wall.

The embedding of visual representation had other benefits. Most included their findings and analysis as infographics in their final assignment. Here is an example of one student's observations over time. The final essays included lovely visually engaging submissions and received high grades as I included this skill of representation in the grading rubric.

d. Stationary Activity Mapping

		WALKING	RUNNING	ROLLING/ BICYCLING	CONSUMING FOOD/DRINKS	SITTING	TALKING	CARRIED BIKE/ DOG/ STROLLER	ANY ACTIVITIES IN FRONT YARD	
MONDAY	9 AM	46 %	4 %	17 %	10 %	7 %	8 %	4 %	4 %	72
	2 PM	52 %	4 %	11 %	8 %	1 %	18 %	6 %	0 %	95
	6 PM	45 %	8 %	29 %	0 %	1 %	14 %	3 %	0 %	107
SATURDAY	9 AM	43 %	4 %	10 %	10 %	8 %	15 %	8 %	2 %	51
	2 PM	49 %	2 %	8 %	11 %	6 %	19 %	5 %	0 %	132
	6 PM	63 %	5 %	15 %	0 %	1 %	12 %	4 %	0 %	83
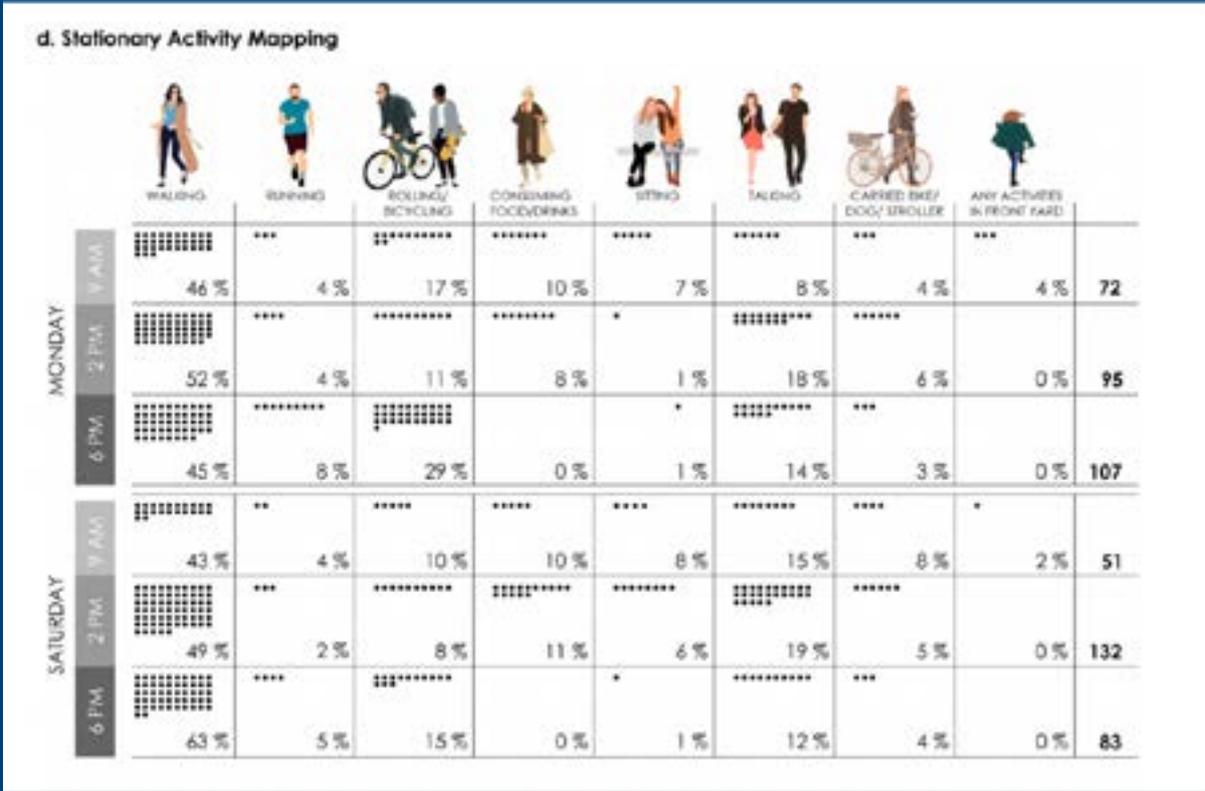
Figure 15. Infographic of street observations by student Polina Suliana

BELOW ARE SOME NOTES ON THE USE OF THE AREA OF STUDY:

Urban Street	WHO	WHEN	HOW LONG	WHERE	WHAT
	Toddlers	With parents	Pushed/Dragged through	On the pathways	Walking, riding in pram
	Teenagers	After School	1 to 2 Hours - meeting and skating	In and around the skatepark, bike path	Meeting, skating, taking, playing
Evenaar Straat Skatepark	Young adults	Passing through to train and buses	Momentary - always rushing	Street island path, crossing path, bike path	Standing, running, walking
	adults	Morning & Night	Slow passing through	Island walking path, crossing path, bike path	Excersise, dog walking, crossing, meeting
	Senior adults	Morning & Night	Slow passing through and apprehensive	Island walking path or crossing path	Greeting, relax and dog walk
	Senior citiens	Rarely	Quick pass from one side to the other - fear skater activity	crossing paths	Fast walk

Figure 10: Street study notes, Evanaar Street, in table form by Author
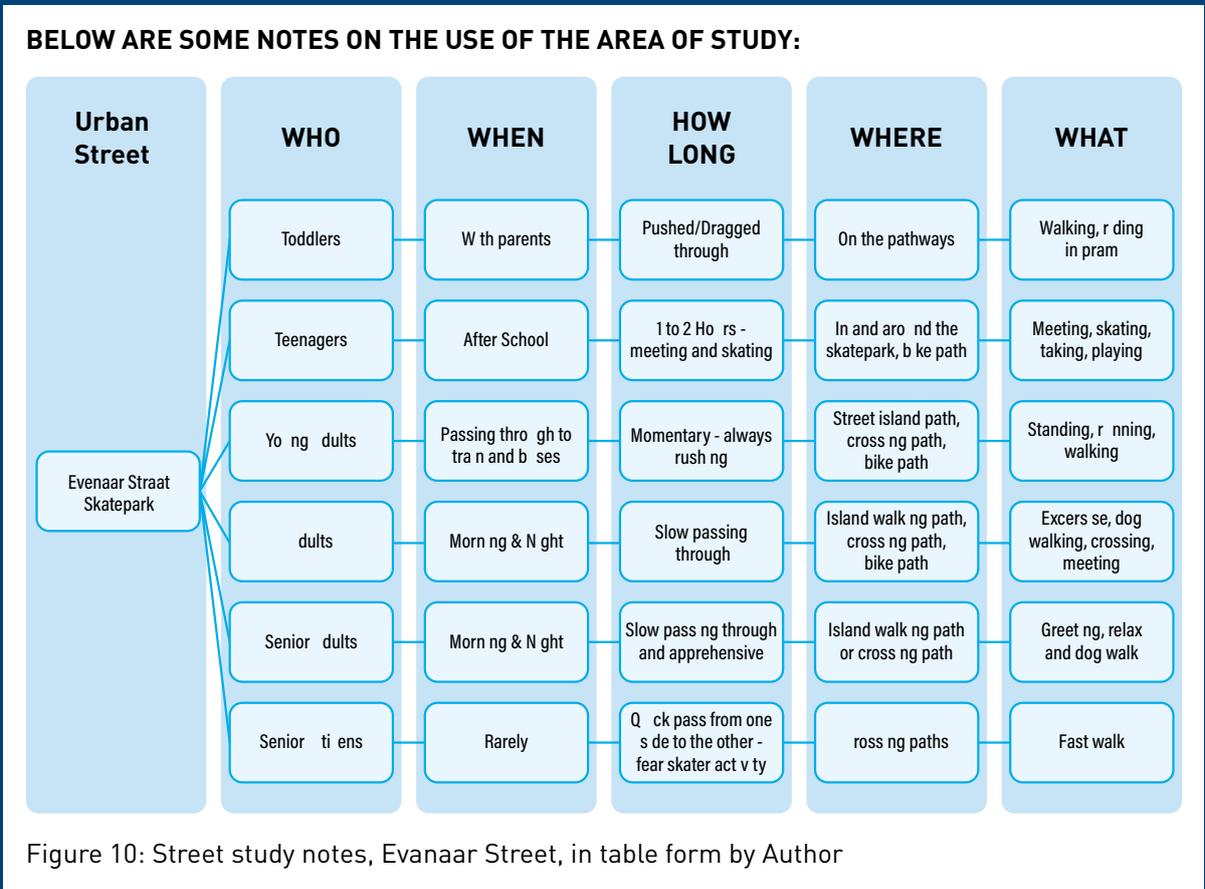
Figure 16. Infographic of street observations by student Chris Gey von Pittius

Results and Impact

Feedback from 2019-2020 suggested that I should issue all information on the module upfront. I had held back on this because the cohort, and their studio location, changed every year. A good compromise suggested by Dr. Lisa Padden was that I recalibrate the assignments in opening weeks and lock-down deadlines at week 3, once all students have confirmed their Options. This allowed me to issue all the assignments early rather than piecemeal and also allowed opportunity for some feedback on assessment methods. The strategy of 'tweek-and-release' therefore worked well to reduce uncertainty for students and it worked for me as I drove my own content and relied less on the vagaries of multiple studio modules.

Despite being on Zoom, the students were incredibly engaged this year with a min 90% attendance every week. I credit this to the weekly presentations of streets by their peers when we could all wonder at the opportunity this Window on the World provided to escape from our otherwise restricted views.

Student Feedback.

39% (11 of the active 28) submitted feedback in the second year of the Pilot between December 2020 to January 2021. Against the specific five questions posed for Student Feedback, this is my interpretation of answers submitted.

Q1. Clear communications: 91% (10) found clear and 9% (1) that assignments got clearer once time was given ahead of each assignment submission. One noted that "there was a very clear module structure for the assignments and good communication throughout of what was expected."

Q2. Engaging students. 91% (10) confirmed they felt engaged and could contribute but 9% (1) found it somewhat 'awkward to bring things up'.

Q3. Flexibility on delivery. 100% (11) There was "no added stress" and "everything was perfect, and it's great that we could learn from the teacher but also from our peers (through the street sections or participation)!"

Q4. Flexibility on learning modes. 91% (10) confirmed it was suitable with one misunderstood answer. A suggestion was to have videos/TED lectures in place of some readings.

Q5. Flexibility on assignments. 100% agreed assessments were inclusive "with diverse learning methods and project delivery options".

"Overall this was a really good module and the teacher was really great at listening to our concerns and making sure that everyone could get involved in their own way!" and one stated "we were given alternative assessment options at various stages of the course which allowed us to learn and present findings in ways that suited us personally."

"I felt this was an excellent aspect of the course which I'd like to see replicated in other courses. Over the course of the trimester I felt the modules that allowed choice - in study topics/ presentation techniques - were the ones in which I learned the most relevant information."

9 students also gave feedback to the standard UCD feedback form. This was an increase on 2 students in 2019 as the duplication of feedback forms (for the Pilot and for UCD) confused some.

Across the five metrics used by UCD student feedback, the average score improved. The five questions are:

Q1. I have a better understanding of the subject after completing this module.
Q2. The assessment was relevant to the work of the module.
Q3. I achieved the learning outcomes for this module.
Q4. The teaching on this module supported my learning.
Q5. Overall I am satisfied with this module.

In 2019-2020, before the Pilot, the mean score was above 3.5 and generally on-par with ARCH module and APEP averages.

Mean (Likert) for Core Questions 1 to 5 (*)					Standard Deviation (Likert)				
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
4.50	4.50	4.50	3.50	3.50	.71	.71	.71	2.12	2.12
3.94	3.96	3.78	3.76	3.58	1.03	1.04	.96	1.19	1.31
4.01	4.05	3.83	3.81	3.68	1.01	.98	.96	1.20	1.25

Figure 17. Stats prepared by UCD, 2019

In 2020-2021, after the Pilot, the mean score was above 4.5 and generally above ARCH module and above APEP averages. This represents a full point improvement from 3.5 to 4.5 average (Thank you to the team!)

Mean (Likert) for Core Questions 1 to 5 (*)					Standard Deviation (Likert)				
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
4.56	4.78	4.44	4.78	4.56	.53	.44	.73	.44	.53
4.04	4.09	3.80	3.82	3.72	.93	.95	.92	1.20	1.17
4.08	4.13	3.85	3.91	3.80	.94	.95	.92	1.18	1.16

Figure 18. Stats prepared by UCD, 2020

Unintended Consequences

The first year of the Pilot Project continued during the first lockdown and acted as a lifesaver for me. I am a part-time member of staff at UCD and the Pilot meant I was able to reach out to teaching colleagues to share solutions to the challenges we faced so abruptly. Despite all the personal demands presented by the initial lockdown, I felt so lucky to witness conviviality and collegiality among this special group. In fact it made me aware that such moments of academic collegiality are all too rare.

In turn, this buoyed me up so I had the resilience to support students. The spill-over of this Pilot was to my other modules and it did not end there. One student confirmed in feedback that the micro-mapping of their academic trajectory "was a way to prepare us to excel beyond just this module". Moreover, a few students have gone on to excel in their final research dissertations.

The Pilot had the delightful consequence of acting in turn as a lift during lockdown. As I had a sense of success in my module delivery and had my material newly organized on Brightspace, I was in a position to throw a metaphorical line out to Erasmus students, many of whom had to suddenly return home from their time abroad in March 2020. Bureaucracy was luckily jettisoned in our school in favour of continuity of educational experience for this special cohort.

With some quick adjustments, I was able to re-run my module six weeks out of sync, which meant none of these adventurous travelers lost out on their education. Erasmus would have been proud of this special cohort and our school's creative adjustments. I could not have done this without the peer-review 'Pilot in Inclusive Teaching' and various collaborative experiences I witnessed, and a culture of support that reached across the college during lockdown.

Based on discussions with our Pilot Group, I developed a Rubric for grading on-line, which captured four learning outcomes against grading criteria. I attended a UCD course on this but it took longer than expected to tweak but had the advantage of grading being objective and transparent. Because all submissions and feedback was digital, feedback as a result was made a little less cumbersome, timely and actionable.

Below is the detail of the grading Rubric and weighting. Alas, it is extremely difficult to capture, print or extract a Grading Rubric from one module to act as a template for another on Brightspace - it requires importing all the content as well!)

Marking Criteria for Academic Writing A

Criteria	Exceptional 5 points	High Honours Level 3.5 points	Honours level 2.5 points	Pass to Hons level 2 points	Incomplete 1 point
Criterion 1 Understanding (Relevance, breath and extent of engagement with theory and cultural context).	The essay/review exceeds expectations, is highly engaged theoretically and demonstrates an exceptional level of understanding.	The essay/review is highly engaged with theory and demonstrates a good level of understanding.	The essay/review demonstrates a good level of engagement and depth of understanding.	The essay/review demonstrates engagement with most texts and an adequate level of understanding.	The essay/review is incomplete.
Criterion 2 Structure (Narrative and structure of formulating/ developing/concluding a research question).	The essay/review is well structured, is driven by a clear research question, and the material is organised to support this.	The essay/review is well structured, is driven by a clear research question, and the material is organised to support this.	The essay/review is well structured and has identified a research interest/ question.	There is some evidence at structuring the essay/review, an interest/quest is outlined but parts remain incomplete.	The narrative lacks a clear organising structure.
Criterion 3 Methodology (Critical thinking and engagement with research methodology and theory).	The essay/review has demonstrated exceptional critical thinking, is visually engaging, and has followed through a research methodology.	The essay/review has demonstrated a high level of critical thinking, is visually engaging, and articulate an intended research methodology.	The essay/review has demonstrated some critical thinking, is visually interesting and/or give evidence of an intended research methodology.	The essay/review has demonstrated some analysis but the graphics are less clear and/or methodology is understated.	The methodology is unclear and lacks engagement with all the material covered and/or is graphically light.
Criterion 4 Language (acknowledges sources, clarity of communication and includes a bibliography plus coversheet on plagiarism).	The essay/review is exceptionally clear, literate and complete. It is well illustrated and references/images are all cited consistently.	The essay/review is very clear, literate and complete. It is well illustrated and references/images are all cited consistently.	The essay/review is clear, literate and/or well illustrated and references/images are all cited consistently.	The essay/review is difficult to understand, reference/images sources and/or illustrations are unclear.	The essay/review requires further editing or work on syntax and/or lacks consistent acknowledging of sources.
Total					/ 20

Figure 19. Rubric from Brightspace

As a result of the iterative process inherent in assessments building up as a cascade, students could use the feedback for their next submission, and could seek clarity ahead of the final assessment.

Apart from two students who were ill (6%), it meant that in the end, 94% of students got honours with 30% getting an A - to A+ grade.

As I run a couple of modules at UCD, I had two bites at the cherry of improvement: I could test suggestions in different environments. One benefit of this learning cycle was that by engaging in this pilot for ARCT40160 Introduction to Urban Design, I could transfer some of the feedback to another module (ARCT40180 - Urban Design Theory) in the following trimester for which I was nominated for a Teaching Excellence Award by students in May 2020.

Recommendations and Advice for Implementation

Figure 20. Extract from the University Observer, edited by ex-student Doireann DeCourcy Mac Donnell, September 2020 and including image by Edward Cullinan Architects signing a co-operative manifesto in 1965.

I thought I would draw from the experience of feedback and implementation to summaries 10 points of recommendation as follows:

1. Whenever an opportunity presents itself, avail of a Teaching Pilot to connect to like-minded colleagues and enjoy the collegiality this triggers.
2. Invest time ahead of running a module to structure the learning experience; then populate Brightspace with to reflect the substructure. This preplanning gives students certainty and security knowing they are in safe hands.
3. Map out the semester, lockdown the timing and detail of all assignments by week 3, and invite feedback on alternatives.
4. Include a non-prescribed week circa week 7 as a 'Golden Week' for unanticipated interest that is sure to emerge from circumstances or ask students to identify an interest.

5. Design assessments as a cascade (growing % of value), give timely feedback and offer choice of assessments.
6. Prepare some pre recordings to allow sufficient time for student discussion or presentations.
7. With past student permission, upload the best of the past year on Brightspace and if possible invite a student to return to present their learning experience and answer student questions.
8. Establish a prize for the best work. (I have established an annual prize for a "Young Urbanist" announced at our end of year show).
9. Be sure to publish findings and let the Pilot team know of any subsequent successes. I recorded some of mine for the University Observer (Fitzpatrick, 2020).
10. Be open with students, accept new challenges and be prepared to be pleasantly surprised.

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