

'Resuscitating the City' - Exploring former hospital sites through Pedagogy and Practice

At the Mackintosh School of Architecture, our stage 4 students routinely explore public housing within the city of Glasgow. This tradition encourages our students to consider housing at both a civic scale and at an intimate scale, recognising that designing successful housing that is both for the people and the city is one of the most important skills for an architect to develop.

In 2015 four Glasgow hospitals were in the process of closure, the Victoria Infirmary and Mansion House Hospital both located on the southside of the city and the Western Infirmary and Yorkhill Hospital for Children located in the West End of the city. All these facilities were controversially being moved to the new, huge Queen Elizabeth Hospital to the south west of Glasgow, in Govan.

The four sites sat within the heart of existing communities within the city and the closure of these complexes and the resulting potential impact of the sale and future use of these expansive sites was cause for concern for many residents.

Three of the four locations were to be privately sold, with the Western Infirmary already sold to Glasgow University for a major expansion of their campus. These highly lucrative yet architecturally challenging sites with few or no listed buildings on them, provided the opportunity for a tabula rasa approach for developers. It also provided a unique opportunity for the Mackintosh School of Architecture to question this obvious approach and consider themes of redundancy, reuse and conservation.

The Urban housing project runs each year and is a group project that has proved successful in introducing, familiarising and opening up the city for study for our diverse cohort of students. The scope of the project oscillates between the expansive overview through the development of strategic design responses to the intimate scale of a home and the consideration of the character of the place and the community.

The Stage 4 students were presented with these four hospital sites and working in groups of 5 or 6, students were given the opportunity to investigate these challenging locations, the surrounding districts and the wider urban contexts. Discussions around redundancy, reuse and conservation developed as well as an awareness of the social and political impact that these Architectural interventions could have.

Proposals were expected to be strategic in nature but were embedded in an understanding of context and place through extensive site investigations and research into urban form, space, landscape, characteristics of the public and private domain as well as the strategic fundamentals of housing.

Over an 8 week period three student groups developed proposals for the Victoria Infirmary site. This culminated in a Public Forum and Exhibition of all students' work with invited guests from diverse backgrounds including people from the NHS, Glasgow City Council, architects and local community leaders joining over 2 days to discuss and question the student proposals.

The three group projects looking specifically at the Victoria Infirmary site, Street Scape, Trophies and Townscape and De-infirm, all looked to retain elements of the existing structures on site, most specifically the iconic Nightingale Pavilions, balconied wings that marched down Battlefield Road. These structures were not listed however the student groups all recognised the importance of retaining them, both in terms of the environmental impact, but also impact that these architectural elements had in relation to creating a sense of place for the community.

All three groups also recognised the opportunity to connect through the site from Queens Park at the north to Battlefield Cross at the south. This link had existed whilst the Victoria Infirmary was in operation, however years of adhoc development had resulted in the short cut through the site becoming less accessible and unpleasant.

All groups had a variety of apartment sizes, supporting the development of a diverse community, and recognised the need for commercial elements to be incorporated within the proposal. The housing provision across all three projects was around 170 flats (mixture of 1 to 4 bed apartments). All projects used a similar palette of materials including blonde sandstone, brick and glass to connect to the buildings being retained on the site.

The resulting projects were all successful in navigating a topographically challenging site whilst making connections to the surrounding context and supporting adaptive reuse of significant parts of the hospital complex.

Sanctuary Homes, working with Collective Architecture, won the competition to redevelop the Victoria Infirmary site in 2016 with planning permission granted in June 2018, significantly with the retention of the Nightingale Pavilions, the only competition entry to do so. The proposal included 413 flats plus offices, retail and public realm works focusing on improving pedestrian routes through the site.

The proposal recognised the need to create a public route through the centre of the site linking Queens Park to Battlefield. This further supported the creation of a public spine at the centre of the site, which activated the deep site plan and provided new frontages.

The proposed material palette was deliberately restrained and has been selected to respond to the Nightingale Pavilions and the surrounding context. A tonally varied facing brick (predominately grey/buff coloured) was proposed as the primary cladding material for the new build blocks. This reflected the blonde coloured sandstone present in the retained buildings. The introduction of tonally complementary large format metal panels allowed the mass of the new buildings to be broken down and important corners to be highlighted through the articulation of rooflines as a series of lanterns which again drew reference from the design of the Nightingale Pavilions.

What is clear from this comparative analysis of student work and the nearly completed scheme is that the students had a profound understanding of the potential for the site and the key principles that the architects also recognised in their competition entry. The students were able to respond to the existing context, the community needs and challenges around redundancy and reuse to develop strong proposals that were ambitious but ultimately realistic and achievable.

This unique opportunity for students to experience and design almost in real time within a city context shows the power that a School of Architecture could have on the future of cities and if undertaken in collaboration with the Council could provide both rigorous and ambitious learning for students and more considered and thorough outputs within the City itself.