

Going behind the closed doors of different religious buildings in Belfast helps reduce young people's fears



The relationship between religious buildings and the shaping of young peoples' identities is one which has received little investigation. Northern Ireland is a region which has experienced a religious divide for many years and provides an interesting setting in which to examine concepts associated with religion, youth, place, and spatial perception of architecture as an aspect of identity. Religion is an important part of life in Northern Ireland and religious buildings have played a vital role in shaping modern society by providing spaces for young people to learn about their faith and culture. This Religion and Society funded study led by Dr Jenny Russell and Dr Karen McPhillips from the University of Ulster investigated how young people from different religious backgrounds perceived certain elements of place, religion and identity, in particular, how they interpreted and negotiated the spatial layout of religious buildings and perceived the relationship between the space and the religion itself. The study endeavoured to promote the cross cultural understanding of young people's perceptions of religion and architecture and provide further clarity into the cultural and social distinctions between young teenagers of conflicting religions.

The team identified five buildings representing different faith traditions in Belfast: St George's Anglican Church, St Malachy's Roman Catholic Church, Belfast Islamic Centre (A converted Georgian residential property which uses the first floor as the mosque), Belfast Synagogue and the Indian Community Centre (A Hindu temple located in the school halls of a disused Methodist Church). The configuration of each religious building was traced through by the research team in order to understand the fundamental elements and processes of each space therefore enabling a basis for comparison. These concepts included spatial dynamics (hierarchy of space), purity (divisions between groups e.g. men and women and preparation before prayer), rituals and symbols as well as tolerance. A total of 19 young people covering three religious backgrounds (Hindu, Protestant and Roman Catholic) were involved in the workshops. The participants ranged between 11-14 years old. The young teenagers were guided around each building by the research team in a 'conversational walkabout tour' during which they had the opportunity to ask questions, draw and to take photographs. One of the key components of the methodology was the opportunity for the youth to draw pictures of each space before, during and after each visit.

The study identified that Protestant and Catholic participants were reluctant to enter unfamiliar religious spaces and possessed a definite lack of knowledge of other religions. Interestingly, the study also showed that the youths tended to be overwhelmed by the objects, texts and symbols in the space and as a result disregarded the form and composition of architecture as well as the buildings original purpose and denomination. The project established that spatial experience of architecture can be used as a tool to help explore and remove the anxieties that surround religious identities, especially in contested spaces such as Northern Ireland. The research team produced

an interpretative exhibition and supporting educational booklet. The exhibition entitled 'Behind Closed Doors' comprises a pentagon shaped structure showcasing each religious building visited as part of the workshops. The youth photographs and drawings are also presented enabling visitors to share in their sense of discovery.

Find out more...

- Access a booklet aimed at young teenagers the project also produced here:
http://eprints.ulster.ac.uk/18701/1/Behind_Closed_Door_A5_Leaflet_FAW.pdf
- Read an article by Karen McPhillips and Jenny Russell about the research published in the *Journal of the Constructed Environment* here:
http://eprints.ulster.ac.uk/17582/1/V10_27087_TheRelationshipbetweenTeenageChildrensIdentityandSpatialPerceptionofReligiousArchitectureinNorthernIreland2_final.pdf

You might also be interested in...

- The Religion and Society funded project 'Multi-Faith Spaces: Symptoms & Agents of Religious and Social Change': <http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/architecture/research/mfs/>
- Another Programme-funded project, about the opting out of Religious Education in Northern Ireland: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/opting_out_of_re_could_and_should_be_easier
- The Religion and Society project 'Troubled Geographies' mapping populations and killings during the Troubles, led by Professor Ian Gregory at Lancaster University: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/gregoryi/>

Award Title

The Production of Religious Architecture in a Diverse World

Team

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jenny Russell (University of Ulster)

Co-Investigator: Dr. Karen McPhillips (University of Ulster)

University

University of Ulster

Award Type

Phase 2 Small Grant



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



Key terms

space, religious architecture, youth, Northern Ireland, sectarianism