Welcome to the International Studio

Michelle Chang, Final Year Student M(Arch)(Prof) (Masters of Architectural Studies Professional) at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

Finding out that I would be one of eleven students from the Commonwealth attending the RIBA International Week Student Charrette was a moment of absolute elation, gratitude and anticipation. Within one email, the opportunity to visit London for the first time, attend my first international architecture conference and to meet and work with architecture and urban design students from around the world was made a tantalising reality.

At the time, I had been working on my thesis for 6 months and the idea of travelling to London was both a dream for my sanity and a nightmare for time keeping. Despite initial feelings of apprehension, a month later I found myself travelling for almost 24 hours and a half, buying an Oyster card at Gatwick airport, and dragging my luggage towards the University Of London International Hall under the summer haze of a British July. To say I was a little tired would be a gross understatement, however, the exhaustion in conjunction with the prospects of a tight schedule for the next few days made it easy for me to fall into a deep, comfortable sleep.

The first day of the conference was a cacophony of new faces, new places, new tastes and bevy of new information. Despite our vastly different geographical origins, the conference and charrette gave the student attendees a sense of immense community and belonging. By the first few hours of the conference, I had already met people from the Bahamas, Jamaica, Tasmania, Nairobi and Pretoria. By the end of the first day, I found myself strolling the streets of London trying to find a place to have dinner with a freshly formed group of “international family”, discussing the topic of the day’s speakers and the plans concerning our charrette group projects.

The student charrette was divided into four themes of the City Annex, City from Scratch, Historical City and Informal City. Following some insightful presentations by architects and researchers on the four topics, we were asked to formulate four groups. To be asked to create a collective manifesto and a case study urban strategy in three days was undoubtedly an intensive endeavour featuring an all-nighter, a number of rushed meals and some heated discussions compounded by collective jetlag. However, despite the intensities, the student charrette was a fertile soil for ideas, friendships, and mentorship to be formulated quickly and efficiently.

The combination of conference events, presentations and workshops fostered a wonderfully progressive atmosphere of learning, sharing, designing and discussing. Hearing world class architects and urban designers share their knowledge and experience about their practice in relation to the realities of the New Urban Agenda, contemporary politics and social justice was extremely encouraging and inspirational. For many of the speakers, there was a clear agenda for articulating the architect as provocateur, negotiator, mediator, activist and improviser. There was a common call for architects and urban designers to consider the human scale of urban policies, to engage with communities and collectively formulate visions of change and betterment for future generations.

With such loaded challenges cast out to each one of us individually, it would have been easy to feel very much alone if not for the audience we were sitting amongst. The power of the charrette and the conference in general was the bringing together of people from around the world under the interest of a common agenda. In this way, the challenges and lessons that were learnt during the conference were shared among us all and the immensity of the tasks ahead appeared a lot more achievable. The conference reminded each one of us that despite our individual design struggles and unique geographical situations, we were be working within an active network: our own international studio.