

2023.10.20 - 2023.10.22

GENEROSITY

Three Days at the Laidlaw Scholars Conference

In October of this year, I boarded a Thursday redeye flight from YYZ to Dublin International Airport.

The following three days unfolded at breakneck speed, but the conversations that occurred between the whirlwind made the trip invaluable.

When I had first applied to attend the European conference, I could not, in my wildest dreams, imagine myself being chosen to attend, nonetheless finding a place within the fold of these incredible scholars. Whenever I recount the story and am asked to share the best part, I always speak of the generosity of the staff, the speakers, and most of all, the scholars.

I had initially applied with a central purpose of meeting some friends in person that I had connected with through the network. The group of us had met a handful of times over the research summer to discuss our projects as they pertained to the city and built environment, and I, being the only North American scholar, had been subject to some serious FOMO when it came to our anticipated fall meetup in Ireland.



Trinity Business School: The Venue of the Conference

Stepping off the plane, I arrived at the sleepy airport around 5am the next day. Knowing fully that I'd be required to stay awake until that night, I purchased my first coffee that morning. To make the day longer, around mid-morning, it began to rain torrents.

When I finally arrived at Trinity College, it was around noon (still a full half day before the conference started). I was generously met with a Trinity scholar who offered to take me for my third coffee of the day and briefly show me some spots around campus. I cannot begin to express my gratitude to the Trinity group, who not only took care of me all weekend, but were wonderful companions all around (even taking me to see the Book of Kells in the Long Library after I had forgotten to buy tickets, which was a highlight).

That evening, I was racked with excitement—and exhaustion.

Fuelled by six coffees, three diet cokes, and two green teas, I proceeded to meet two of the panelists in the session I was facilitating: Susanna Kempe, the CEO of the Laidlaw Foundation, and Bidemi Afolabi, an alumnus and founder of the disruptive technology startup, ProMotion.



Scholars Left to Right: Emma H., Aliza K., Nadia K.

I was again astonished by the generosity and warmth extended by these two figures, both of whom I had been so intimidated to meet. Not only were they kind in our conversation, but they showed reciprocal interest in my own research and passions. I ended the long day with the immense delight of finally seeing the scholars I had, for so long, been ardent to meet. This group was so incredibly remarkable and talented; yet also down to earth, humorous, and kind.

Falling asleep that night (despite the five hour time difference) proved to be quite easy. The next day was packed with speakers, events, and activities—all of which were immensely interesting and engaging. I was struck by the depth to which my fellow scholars were equally invested in aspects of ethical leadership and the positive impacts of their own research.

Learning about new diversity initiatives within the college, hearing from the provost, and receiving the keynote from a young and inspiring, yet empathetic, climate activist, were all highlights of the day.

In between, I had the opportunity to present my own poster, during which time I feared that no one would be interested. I was proven tremendously incorrect, to my delight, as scholars from across the continent came to speak with me about my observations and their implications around the region of my Ontario university.

We concluded the day with a formal dinner (held in a room that I was informed was featured in the television drama series, *Normal People*). As a student of architecture, I was (quite obviously) blown away by the design of the city, but much of the urban fabric paled in comparison with the 18th century dining hall and its open atrium. After finding my seat (which admittedly, took quite some time and a few errors), I was greeted by scholars from Trinity and St. Andrews, who exchanged their own research, interests, and jokes with me. From string theory to geopolitics and journalism, the night flew by.



Laidlaw 2023 Urban Studies / Built Environment Scholars

The last day of the conference was melancholy. Saying goodbye to the amazing people I had only started to get to know proved difficult, and yet it was time to depart and return to/confront the reality of our own institutions (and the 3000 word essay about waste management that I had due that evening). This being said, we vowed to stay in touch (albeit intermittently), and exchanged information.

Overall, this trip is one that I will always remember—not only as my first academic conference, but as a weekend of reciprocity, kindness, laughter, and the beginning of many wonderful friendships. While I had stepped through the doors strewn with imposter syndrome, this quickly dissipated with the generosity and openness of my fellow scholars. I'd like to thank the organizers and staff at the Laidlaw foundation one thousand times over for this incredible conference, and I cannot wait to see where all the scholars I met go in their future endeavors.

