

## **Towards an architecture of engagement: researching contested urbanism and informalities**

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In the following we make connections between a number of seemingly disparate urban research activities. The projects were initiated, conducted and developed with the students and staff of the UCL Development Planning Unit's MSc Building and Urban Design (BUDD)<sup>i</sup> in active collaboration with partners and urban activist groups. All were action-oriented, using a pragmatically theoretical approach, attempting to uncover and research the hidden forces that shape material urban worlds and, visa-versa, how the material and everyday conditions shape relationships, imaginations and people. They each show how design is essentially about the production of space, not as fixed and abstract reality but as something actively and contingently produced. As such design is understood as an impure and discrepant practice, as a way to address urban challenges from the perspective of excluded groups in contested urban spaces. Each project shows that the potential of design can no longer remain within the realms of intent, form, or representation but needs to tie these to its consequence and effects: to its agency.

From a collective design process in the complex and multifaceted territory of Dharavi in Mumbai to a stroll in Beirut across the green line and the Solidere's downtown, and an immersion inside a real heterotopia, a squatter-occupied building in Rome and its spatial narratives, these projects are examples of how the urban designer is pushed to actively question his or her practice and to dig deep into the multi-layered complexity of material and immaterial events encountered in a given context. We call for a recalibration of the practice<sup>ii</sup> in order to get a better understanding of how to deal with the non-designed and the un-designable, be it power relations, informal organisational structures, collective and individual imaginations and aspirations. Architecture and design in situations of informality and marginality require engagement in a less-than-ideal world and an appreciation of architecture beyond its mainstream. Methods must proceed from the current state of affairs and existing modes of spatial production. Such a statement is not to claim for revolution! It is rather to call for an investigation of political subjectivities along with their material/spatial conditions.

The projects are exemplar of this renewed engagement of urban professionals and of the coming back of advocacy at the forefront of architecture: in Rome we were actively engaging with a community of squatters, and writing altogether a new mythology of their space, against any social stigma or rhetoric of exclusion from the rest of the urban social and built fabric; in Mumbai, after working with the activist group SPARC in the struggle against the DRP (Dharavi Redevelopment Project) imposition of a vocabulary of comprehensive planning aiming to fix slums in a world class city, we conceived design strategies as acts of resistance, a process whose mandatory aim is to envision an alternative spatial

scenarios and imaginations that encompasses the situated urban human resilience and material and relational resourcesfulness<sup>iii</sup>; in the video *Dwelling the Threshold*, the authors Muzzonigro and Zacchi reasoned on the encounter of the Self and the Other, on design as a practice of encounter in a space in-between; in Beirut, finally, a question is permanently suspended above the head of the practitioner while strolling between the city's post-conflict landscape and its new neoliberal developments: "What [design] methodology is to be found in the middle of this landscape? [...] And perhaps a better question: is it possible to devise?"<sup>iv</sup>.

### **An architecture of engagement**

Over one billion people now live in 'slums' or 'informal' housing settlements—a number expected to double by 2030, making the dominant expression of urban form globally what can be labelled as 'informal urbanism'. In our view an architecture of engagement has the capacity to reconsider and recalibrate the engagement of design and responsive architecture in order to develop appropriate actions, within this contemporary urban condition: the un-designed, perhaps the un-designable. As such we make a plea for an urban design approach, engaging in situated urban practice that is relational, collective, embedded, reflexive and transdisciplinary.

**Active** refers to a practice that is engaged with material conditions and social and political complexities with an ongoing balancing act between withdrawing from taking action and engagement, as it seeks to cultivate a collective imagination alive to the potential of transformative action. In practice, such an approach entails engaging both with activist approaches to research (e.g. building on practices of insurgent planning, creation of platforms and visible actions) and with methods for institutional development that seek out negotiation and periodic consensus a contingent cooperation between government, business and civil society actors, as it was explicit for instance in Mumbai, where the methodology hinged upon an analysis of the possibilities already in place, the knowledge produced inside Dharavi, and their subsequent historical layers of transformations on a design that capitalises on those working progress and imperfect actions of incremental changes and the windows of opportunity that they implied.

### **[figure 1: Dharavi]**

Such practices and research are also necessarily **relational** - recognising that knowledge production and learning are defined within relative positions, and in conversation with existing discourses, material processes and the socially constructed and mediated structures of actors, resources and meanings through which we make sense of the world. In our work we lay out these configurations, helping us to see the

constraints for action as well as the potentials to open up new spaces of possibility and new visions. The work in Rome was exemplary in this sense, in interpreting the different layers of narratives, both spatial as well as personal, that were overlapping in the squatter-occupied space called Porto Fluviale, and the everyday mediations between a multitude of individual aspirations and a supposedly unique collective will, that was certainly bearing the need for the squat's leadership to 'polish' it from impurities and diversions. Illustrating an 'archaeology' of Porto Fluviale allows to remap new pathways and new narratives of the inhabited place.<sup>v</sup>

**[figure 2: Porto Fluviale]**

The work is then inevitably **collective** - whereby knowledge production is understood as a common endeavour pursued by networks of individuals, community organisations, NGOs, and public [and private] sector institutions that share the value of both aesthetics and ethics alike. The starting point is to question the role of the expert, and the ways that discourses of expertise are constituted in particular contexts, as this so called expertise often limits the out-of-the-box thinking, thus limiting possible alternative and better outcomes. In 'Dwelling the threshold' Muzzonigro and Zacchi called for collective moments of encounter in 'circles', 'borders' and 'interstices', searching respectively for performances and events, 'common' limits and 'contiguity' of spaces, 'residual' fragments: all of them necessary elements of a renewed approach to design. Here the authors researched an operative theory founded upon the Foucaultian *heterotopia*, able to suggest new territories of investigation beyond the one immediately visible.<sup>vi</sup>

**[figure 3: frame from Dwell the Threshold movie]**

Research and design research are also **embedded** – where learning and knowledge production are seen as processes integrally related to the practices and lived experiences of people in specific settings and locations. This means recognising development as a collective endeavour that relates to multiple subjectivities, and is sensitive to emotion, and multiple ways of engaging with the world. How can this be possible in a landscape as complex as the one in Beirut? In common with the historical roots of critical theory and critical urban commentary, the research also has to be **reflexive** – acknowledging the contexts in which it is produced. More specifically the approaches question fixed understandings of the world as these are unable to produce alternative and counter-hegemonic outcomes. Again in Beirut, this comes to the fore: "This was ground zero for a decade - the area adjacent to the green line, suffering the greatest physical damage during the war. And it is because of this that the area has undergone the greatest reconstruction in the post-war years. A playground for a conglomerate developer, Solidere has attempted to incorporate both the aesthetic of pre-war Beirut 'charm', and post-modern neoliberal design into the

development of the 21st century city"<sup>vii</sup>: a counter-hegemonic outcome was impossible here, and it should instead be the role of the designer to grasp how to move toward new inclusive possibilities. Strolling and discussing, while observing urban environments and their everyday life, impressions were conceived in a sort of situationist-remembrance.

**[figure 4: from Beirut]**

Finally, **transdisciplinarity** becomes fundamental – where complexity is recognised and celebrated through the promotion of critical engagement with multiple partial perspectives. This is not an attempt to address complexity through a relativist engagement with all possible forms of knowledge. Rather, it is a perspective that prioritises listening, without prejudice, to multiple voices, to the extent that listening can enable fresh perspectives on the world. The project in Beirut brought together four academics with very different backgrounds, a sort of impossible mix but eventually an amusing experiment exchanging knowledge and perspectives: a new situated vocabulary emerged and was centred on the abandonment of expert knowledge. Complexity was recognised and celebrated through the promotion of critical engagement with multiple partial perspectives and vocabularies.

**[figure 5: transdisciplinarity in Beirut]**

### **New sites of critical interventions**

The projects presented here are all a rediscovery of the potentials of architecture and design, offering a different reading of the contemporary city and allow the activation of new sites of critical intervention. They contest the contemporary social drift of design and architectural practice focused primarily on the expansion of the role of 'the architect'. Rather, they are a call to arms for researching and engaging with contested urban conditions, arguing for an architect that as Jeremy Till suggests is “bound to the earth but with the vision, environmental sense, and ethical imagination to project new (social) spatial futures on behalf of others”.<sup>ix</sup>

The projects were an attempt to move beyond ‘expert’ knowledge as conventionally understood, expressing care for both the process by which places and spaces are produced and the product that emerged as a result of the collaboration, becoming a sort of wiki process, with open-source contributions. Such collaborative processes require for everyone to render their relevant beliefs and knowledge systems, including professional expertise, vulnerable. Design becomes a collective and community-based active practice, whereby aesthetics becomes both a means and an end in addressing social and political challenges.

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- <sup>i</sup> Development Planning Unit. “MSc Building and Urban Design in Development.” 13 August 2014.  
<http://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/programmes/postgraduate/msc-building-urban-design-in-development>
- <sup>ii</sup> Camillo Boano, Melissa Garcia-LaMarca, William Hunter, ‘Deconstructing and recalibrating urban design in the global south.’ In *Explorations in Urban Design: An Urban Design Research Primer*, edited by Matthew Carmona, 25-34. London: Ashgate, 2014.
- <sup>iii</sup> Camillo Boano, William Hunter and Caroline Newton, C., *Contested Urbanism in Dharavi. Writings and Projects for the resilient city*. London: Development Planning Unit, 2013.
- <sup>iv</sup> William Hunter, ‘Four men and a methodology (?) in Beirut’ *The Journal of Space Syntax*, 4.2 (2013): 242-245.
- <sup>v</sup> Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci, ‘Agamben’s Gesture of Profanation and the Politics of Play in Urban Design.’ *Design Philosophy Papers*, 12(1): 59–90.
- <sup>vi</sup> Azzurra Muzzonigro and Camillo Boano, ‘Dwell the threshold: encountering otherness.’ In *Living Landscapes/Landscapes for Living*, edited by Claudia Perrone, Planum. *The Journal of Urbanism*.
- <sup>vii</sup> William Hunter, ‘Four men and a methodology (?) in Beirut’ *The Journal of Space Syntax*, 4.2 (2013): 242-245.
- <sup>ix</sup> Till, J., (2009) *Architecture Depends*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 195.