

dpu summerLab

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Leveraging *the city as a laboratory* for developing socially responsive design strategies

MEDDELLIN

SANTIAGO

ROME

LONDON

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spatial narratives in
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Without all of your diligence and partnership we are minnows wandering aimlessly through murky waters.

Credits

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A Late Summer Lab's Dream

By Camillo Boano and William Hunter

“Swift as a shadow, short as any dream; Brief as the lightning in the collied night”. Just as Shakespeare’s Lysander describes to Hermia how quickly true love can be destroyed, a participant on a DPU summerLab workshop might too find themselves in some state of longing, in this case longing for more time, a next step. Having just began to familiar with their contextual surroundings, or perhaps even felt excitement for the emerging design speculation, the curtain calls. The workshop ends, planes are boarded, reflections are written. But as Italo Calvino suggested “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.” A participant on a DPU summerLab workshop has always a new horizon a new ‘something else’.

When we dreamt four years ago of establishing a roving itinerant workshop series, a traveling laboratory of sorts, we knew that the timeframe we were considering assigning to each workshop would not be a long one. Of course this is not very surprising in itself for a workshop motif, though the kind of scope we were dreaming for each workshop was more akin to something that required time. As it were, the notion of rapidity is at the heart of the DPU summerLab ethos and not simply for a logistical reasoning. Rapidity in urban research and practice may not exactly reveal all levels of a story and there is always a need for repeat visits or testing, but going head-first with speed and uncertainty into a problem can force one to be alert, ready and in a particular state of strategic absorption, qualities that can lead to some interesting and revealing hypotheses. And it is very possible that if these actions are curated in a way that balances the planned and unforeseen, and fosters a truly informed experience, then the outcomes, however untested, can carry a significant weight in reflective potential. In a way we were looking at freshness and rapidity, as well as ignorance and curiosity as strategic value ingredients.

This was our dream. And with any real dream or goal there is a necessary effort that goes beyond the actual workshop week itself. In this case DPU summerLab has become an eye-opening experience of coordination, master-mining and luck. We have been very fortunate, with the energy and help from a mix of collaborators, ex-students, and the emergence of some very small, but timely angel funding to be where we are today, coming off a string of four very successful and concurrent workshops

that constitute the 3rd annual series of DPU summerLab that has, since 2011, involved over 80 participants.

Behind the logistical fever and surplus that planning these labs entails, there has always been a strong conceptual ethos that underpins our desires to initiate and sustain such a series in the midst of financial and institutional challenge. Flowing out of the same mantra in which we predicate the MSc Building and Urban Design in Development at the DPU, a course set on merging of critical theory and practical action, summerLab workshops contain and promote a healthy dose of research-minded methodology in a very DPU style: grounded in actions. Still, the summerLab model does not in itself align with the traditional paradigm of scholarly research, something we are constantly reminded of during departmental meetings and roundtables. The protocols of bringing in legitimate funding as a result of our non-teaching efforts, is by and large our primary job as a faculty. And even with the emergence and re-fostering of notions on design research and other similar strands of juxtaposing scholarly alternatives, the idea to give attention to a program that pins participants and students not of our own out in cities up against a clock with arguably uncertain outcomes does little to help the conventional mode of departmental objectives.

Yet we also see these Labs as a way to promote and continue the healthy tradition of the DPU’s global presence through partnership at a time when the department itself is in the middle of a transition from decades-long establishment and topical niche to a faculty competing with the buzz of social responsibility and education

of future urban practitioners. It is an opportunity for us to align more with mainstream practices of product generation and dissemination but in our own unique manner of approach and ethics. And we felt no shame in doing so for the simple fact that if we stand silent on our morals and opinions without putting them in play, then parade would pass us by. This presented us with the challenge of creating and coordinating Labs that were inherently different in their process and experience for those who participate. And beyond a different kind of experience, we wanted to leave participants with a real sense of the possibilities surrounding reclamation of urban disciplines and action research.

The word laboratory surely sounds like a place for experiments, scientific oriented didactics and bodily-related and a place of applied-research. We devise such ‘moments’ and ‘spaces’ as antidote to the self-sufficient discipline of design (architectural and urban), taking full advantage of the interdisciplinary nature and wide range of expertise and interests of the participants, the partners and the supporting staff. In doing so, we aimed to discovered and reposition design research into a heuristic model where “strolling and discussing, while immersing into urban environments and their everyday life”, conceived in a sort of situationist-remembrance, are part of a wider reflection on urban design method,

“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears” (Calvino)

especially in states of uncertainty. The rapid nature of the Labs allows for an accelerated dive into complex subject matters in a delicate balance between ignorance and expertise, adopting a more nuanced, yet critical approach of “within and between” grounded in the historical attitude of progressive action-research and practice determination of DPU. The “Labs”, then become an open immersion in both discrete objects and social processes in order to avoid any disciplinary construction or territorial fortresses while suggesting a hybrid, mutable and tactically contextual process of design.

Introduced by Gramsci, the word “tactic,”

was of great significance as it denotes “resistance” within a given urban context allowing the participants to, unlike the radical tools of modernist urbanism, depict and investigate resistance as an outcome of small and continuous urban adaptations. This not only dictates an overall transformation, but also favors incremental change in relation to the context within which it operates and therefore can be used for both “critical assessments” and “the processes of spatial production”. Guided by “curiosity, refusal and innovation” the urban territories we set down in are explored as a gesture of a complex line of movements,

The itineraries for Medellin and London were based on the idea of surveying a very large representational area of landscape and landmark projects in order to grasp the nature of what development forces are at play in the city. In Medellin the landscape has undergone major shifts in modernization and upgrading around large scale infrastructure, specifically the advent two cable car lines stemming from the successful elevated rail lines. While certainly bringing a heightened notoriety and tourist contingent to Medellin, the cable cars are serving a marginalized demographic that had prior been relegated to peripheral mountainside

following prior investigations with various groups bent on maintaining an alternative voice while exposing themselves to the realities of an extremely historical and traditional city center.

Thus the different Labs were testing a new relation with the everyday that challenged its contingencies, its various codes, and languages. Such an “everyday” does not suggest a non-relevance of spatial reference and design expertise with its codified knowledge. It is not meant to destroy, but rather to recalibrate, re-position, and expand in the everyday life, the potential of transforming and changing the world. We claim that all of our experiences contribute to this border pedagogy in a renewed dialectical discourse. Knowledge is exchanged and with such it comes reciprocal learning, the power to act, the potential to release the forces at play to work in places with a design that is sometimes weak in fully understating the complexity and contradiction of the encountered reality. This “weak” design act places architecture and urban design back at the center of social, political and cultural milieu. Moving beyond expert knowledge requires us to care as much as about the process by which places and spaces are produced as they do about the product that emerges as a result of our collaborations. The engagement in collaborative processes requires that everyone make their relevant belief and knowledge vulnerable, including the professional. Inherent is a willingness to risk one’s own worldviews and knowledge in exchange for the ability to see the world differently- to acknowledge the dreams of others.

“weak” design acts place architecture and urban design back at the center of social, political and cultural milieu

a series of spatial storytelling along the edges of the spaces that contain it, composing, like in a musical plot, a series of distinct intervals of silence, emptiness and thresholds. The act of navigating the city through explorations in contour, walking and trespassing has been heavily inherited from meeting and discussions with Francesco Careri (Laboratorio Arti Civiche – Stalker) and his great civic passion and sensibility for performance.

The contemporary urban modernity is totally uncertain. As a rock-solid reality, Andrea Branzi developed the notion of ‘non-figurative architecture’ to refer to ‘an architecture that becomes an urban semiosphere’, surpassing its constructed limits and becoming a producer of im-material qualities that change over time.’ Whilst strolling down many of the streets and alleys in Medellin, Santiago, Rome and London, summerLab participants were forced to (re)-imagine the past and the urban qualities that were changing over time, recreating conceptual maps and re-problematising the spatial nature of the transformations.

Each Lab sits in a complex realm of borders and often weak territories, between modern and postmodern, politics and aesthetics, truth and lies, here and there, north and south, theory and practice. As such it is a broader conversation that both interrogates and confirms an appreciation for the potential significance of our practice. Acknowledging the complexity and the contradictions in each site of intervention we have learned how to constantly negotiate meanings and positions including where we any disciplinary expertise is located. In refusing a conventional, safer, expert-based (and object-driven) culture, we affirm the power of design to make a substantial contribution to the messy vitality of everyday life in service of equality.

Varying in scope there were similarities in the territorial platform in which the Labs operate.

settlement with lengthy commutes to jobs and life in the city center. The supposed success of the first iteration has spawned plans for a third line in the northeastern quadrant of Medellin, begging the question and critique on the future impact of communities along the planned corridor.

In London we cast our eye on the aftermath of the 2012 Olympics, particularly questioning the themes of legacy and localization. Before focusing on the area of Hackney, we circumvented the new developments in Stratford around the Olympic Park, even pushing our journey to the Docklands and the new Emirates Cable Car connecting the Greenwich Peninsula and the O2 (Millennium Dome) to the Royal Docks as well as hitting parts of trendy Dalston. The future of East London is very much living in the minds of profit-driven individuals while the rest of the surrounding Burroughs engage in the reality of the present day, through grassroots local initiatives and temporary forms of occupation that seek to ensure some kind of sustainable identity and promotion of the area’s history.

On the other hand, the specific locales of Santiago and Rome were examined in a more microscopic manner – through neighborhood regeneration and networks of occupied spaces. Providencia is an area that has already seen a degree of gentrification, yet there are still opportunities to mediate its transformation in ways that encapsulate a more holistic planning mechanism through collated acupuncture tactics. How this area’s transformation relates to other parts of a growing cosmopolis that often forgets its diverse character is rife with debate. In Rome, the phenomenon of a burgeoning regulated occupation network that repels notions of conventional development and social constructs was met with formulations around inclusion into a wider fabric. Here the Lab was

