

GLOBAL EDUCATION

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FOR URBAN FUTURES

Contemporary challenges such as rapid urbanisation and spatial injustices, have to be investigated and tackled by embracing a new and radical mode of

design research. We consider design not as a noun or a set of objects, but rather as a verb and a series of processes that engage with political and social realities.' In doing so, we suggest a shift in design education – that is, the way of thinking, researching and practising design. Design, we argue, must necessarily be collective, active, embedded, reflexive, relational and trans-disciplinary. These six pedagogical dimensions, explored in the paper, foster a constitutive role for urban education in addressing exclusion and inequality, and global disparities in the production of knowledge and space. Our approach is immersed in the ethical and practical tradition of action learning which has been advocated by the Development Planning Unit. The Unit is a leading centre for the education of professionals and practitioners to develop socially responsive, critical and transformative practices to challenge urban poverties, informalities and inequalities.

Focusing on how people shape and reshape urban space, and social relations in their everyday life, with a critical per-

spective over conflicting narratives, students are taken through a 'learning-by-doing' journey in several places across different countries. Such a journey unfolds either metaphorically, through the exploration of remote case studies within the confines of the Studio in London, or literally, by embarking on a field-project (recent destinations include India, Turkey, Thailand and Cambodia). Here, students work with relevant urban actors, to frame strategies of transformation at multiple scales. In both stages, and incrementally, students develop a critical understanding of the ways that the social and the spatial are entwined in urban space through devising and conducting action-oriented and people-centred acts of design research. Students actively engage with the resilience of local communities, and the material conditions and socio-political complexities of a place.

Such an engagement is, by its nature, a collective one, since space and knowledge are recognised as a collective production. Our educational approach starts by questioning the role of the expert and the way in which discourses of expertise are constituted in particular contexts. The Studio unfolds through a continuous dialogue within workgroups – often through role-plays – whereby design is understood as a non-linear process, influenced by the

A SIX-FOLD MANDATE FOR AN ENGAGED URBAN DESIGN – RESEARCH EDUCATION



Dharavi map, MSc Building & Urban Design in Development, Urban Intervention Studio 2007/08.





Socio-spatial construct workshop. MSc Building & Urban Design in Development, Urban Intervention Studio 2014/15.

Design can frequently produce sterile stylistic exercises, if the system that sustains it is geared towards or complicit in social inequality. A new social and political framework for design education must be imagined and practiced

1 This urban design research approach is developed through the MSc Building and Urban Design in Development at the Development Planning Unit, UCL.

Giovanna Astolfo is an architect and Teaching Fellow at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit where she teaches in the Urban Intervention Studio. Her research focuses on the meanings, modes and practices of community architecture.

Giorgio Talocci teaches Urban Design for Development and Critical Urbanism at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit. He is researching on the significance of urban 'voids' in the government of the city, with a particular focus on South-East Asian cities.

Camillo Boano is an architect, urbanist and educator. He is Senior Lecturer at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, where he directs the MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development. He is also co-director of the UCL Urban Laboratory.

multiple and often divergent aspirations of different parties. Students will experience this first-hand in the field, working in close contact with an array of actors, and encountering their disagreements and the different kinds of knowledge they possess.

Knowledge production and learning are necessarily defined within relative positions, in conversation with existing discourses, material processes and the socially constructed and mediated structures of power. It is through unpacking these relational dimensions that students make sense of urban objects and

processes, and identify opportunities for positive transformation.

To say that design research must be active or action-oriented refers to the activation of such potentialities, seeking out possibilities for negotiation. This

attitude is constantly practised in the Studio and boosted in the fieldwork. Here, students engage with people-driven processes of slum upgrading working closely with communities and learning from 'people's technologies', their ability to adapt, resist or change in adverse conditions. Such action entails a reflexive dimension too, especially with regard to the role and position of designers working within

people-driven processes. It is in the apparent tension between the active and reflexive approach that an on-going balancing act between withdrawal from taking action and engagement plays out. While the action-oriented approach promotes a full engagement with a specific place, the reflexive attitude helps to resist from intervention at any cost. Students are encouraged to move away from any solution-focused vision of urban design, and to deal instead with precariousness and informality as constituent parts of urban reality.

The design interventions that emerge from this process are not static design solutions, straightforward or conventional answers but rather flexible, investigative and open-ending narratives. In this sense, our mode of design-research is embedded in the practices and lived experiences of people in specific settings and locations; and relates to multiple subjectivities, emotions and ways of engaging with the world.

Finally, trans-disciplinarity is fundamental to our approach. Not simply as an expansion of focus, but rather as the recalibration of





Bridging Newham art installations, 2014/15. MSc Building & Urban Design in Development.

the research itself, towards a trans-design research that does not fixate on elements, images and forms, but rather on their processes and their potentialities. Design can frequently produce sterile stylistic exercises, if the system that sustains it is geared towards or complicit in social inequality. A new social and political framework for design education must be imagined and practiced.

