Potentiality, potentials and design research: notes for a subversive ethos

by Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci

Designing in contested spaces obliges us to rethink the conditions of our engagement with the urban realm. In the first five years of its life, the DPU summerLab has aimed to question the way we look at urban environments and in so doing re-write such rules of engagement.

Most of our work has concentrated on areas that were striving to survive pressures of development and the rhetoric of urban change. Or that were the ultimate result of those pressures, confined to thrive as interstitial realities, or in urban fringes. How to perform design research in these spatialities? How to ground in their emergent, recombinant, marginal and often vanishing urbanisms? How to engage their populations while critically reflecting on our positionality as designers and researchers?[1]

From Santiago to Beirut, from Mostar to London, the summerLab 2015 series have pursued the overarching aim of unveiling and interpreting the conflicting narratives and everyday socio-spatial practices of the several study areas. In this sense, we asked the workshops' participants to consider as first and foremost act of design the identification of the latent potentials of the urbanisms they were investigating and experiencing. Their design activities were called to uncover areas of opportunity, available resources, levels of community organisation and mobilisation, but also collective and individual narratives, imaginations, endeavours. Gathering and critically reading this information is complex and, at points, seemingly arbitrary. Articulating design research faces the same risks. Such indeterminacy, though, embodies the potential of design research within the summerLab experience.

Design research is indeed neither static nor structural but is instead a shifting body of conceptual approaches in need of constant evolution, nothing but the constant re-evaluation of ideas and knowledge as entry points and their ulterior adjustment as output. As Findeli[2] succinctly elaborates, defining design research is the essential starting point to make better design questions, but more importantly, to make design and research parallel activities that interconnect along the routes of exploration. We deliberately avoid the use of design briefs, but ask the participants to formulate design research questions during the first days of workshop, in order to ground such questions into the participants' (collective and individual) understanding of a specific locality, and into the empirical evidence they experienced with their own bodies – walking, talking with locals, gathering, taking pictures and making sketches, drawing and designing maps, sitting in a public space or hanging out at night in another one.

All these activities contribute to fulfil a collective design research endeavour, that neither starts nor ends with the summerLab itself. We land in an apparently tangled whole of overlapping agendas, whereby the workshop can represent an important – though contingent – moment in the recalibration of power relations amongst different actors. It is a delicate operation that makes imperative a reflection on our role as designer and researchers. With this aim, in this publication, we challenged the workshops' tutors, local facilitators and participants to think what doing design research through investigating potentials might have have entailed, and to question to what extent our investigations had been exhaustive and inclusive toward the manifold narratives the summerLab encountered on the ground. At the same time we asked them to reflect on the pedagogical challenges of doing design research in a one week workshop: how will our positionality reflect such a short term engagement, and how can this build on the previous work of our partners in order to generate afterlives?

In Santiago, Matías Garretón (page 8) puts the emphasis on the extreme diversity of the Yungay neighbourhood in Santiago and on the self-transforming character of its local potentials. He questions the legitimisation of the designer's activity in contested neighbourhoods and calls for a rethinking of the practitioner's role as facilitator of the urban transformation, as someone that could negotiate the threshold between the unseen potentials and the barrio's visible everyday public life. If creativity was everywhere in Yungay, how to find and build upon its collective endeavours? The designer becomes this way engaged in an activity of meta-design, opening up spaces for the 'real' designers, the inhabitants of the place themselves, to acquire decision-making power. Luis Valenzuela (page 12) argues that design research makes the design experience a less singular case, and rather, links it profoundly to empirical and transferrable knowledge. Design research becomes therefore a powerful tool to critique

conventional studio-based teaching: these are defined as a 'reverse' pedagogical system, whereby students are asked to respond to a design brief but are given no means "to gain a greater understanding of contexts and their elements via their design".[3] Design research instead allows to adapt to new circumstances, without losing the grasp of their complexities.

From Beirut, Dalia Chabarek (page 20) proposes a reflection around potentials and relevance, insofar as understanding a place through storytelling can grow a sense of belonging to a collective (and perhaps localised) endeavour in the workshops' participants themselves. During the neighbourhood walks in Ras Beirut, participants were exposed to such a density of intense stories that eventually changed their perception of the study area: no longer the site for a design exercised, but a place from where to build a longer-term relationship with the whole city or at least establish empathy and sympathy toward its narratives of change. Diala Lteif (page 24) expands on the 'designerly' way of knowing the city experienced by the participants, and to the constant shifts of scale proposed by the workshops' tutors in order to spark off an interest to gain more and more knowledge and devise new methods of design research. Diala remarks how during the workshop the attention shifted from the end goal to the process, and design research "became an implicit yet fundamental consequence and not so much an explicit focus",[4] with the workshop becoming an important ground for the designerly ways of knowing to emerge and thrive.

In Mostar, Giulia Carabelli and Mela Žuljević (page 32) reflect on engaging the potentials of Ruište and Mostar through different modalities in order to explore manifold possibilities: during the workshop their deep knowledge of the case overlapped with the sensation that new imaginations were yet to be explored, and therefore in need to be catalysed through giving non-prescriptive directions to the participants – most of them unfamiliar with Mostar and therefore free from preconceptions and open to explore new routes of design research and engagements with its realities. One of this means of engagement was the final exhibitions, fundamental in reconfiguring a way of interacting with citizen and local authorities and create "an apt space for new networks of collaborative consultancy to materialise".[5] Camila Cociña and Diana Salazar (page 36) speak of the pedagogical importance of engaging with a wide set different actors in order to make students successfully engaging with their imaginaries, and reflect on the

challenges and opportunities of doing so in a one-week workshop: immersing oneself in the local dynamics amplified the possibilities for collective learning in spite of the apparent initial unintelligibility of certain situations, and such collective learning kept expanding thanks to the interactions with the local partners and the ripple effects of these toward other local realities.

In London, Alberto Duman (page 44) outlines a bitter reflection on the power of envisioning the future of a place as a means to occupy space in it and set forth in time its present inequalities: "What future for the Royal Docks? And more poignantly, for whom?"[6]. Alberto phrases such spatial interrogation in terms of resistance, meant as the assertion of rights for present communities to take one's place in the *not-yet* of their habitat, and emphasises the difficulty of the summerLab's participants in fathoming the current contested condition of the Docklands and extracting / activating the potentials still residing in such a torn present.

Stemming from the London's workshop, we are glad to host for the second year the special insert 'Depoliticising Verticality' (page 55) with a contribution by Josue Robles Caraballo and featuring works by the students from the Advanced Graduate Design Studio, USF School of Architecture + Community Design (Tampa, Florida, US). Josue reflects on the need for rethinking a communitarian approach to the design of vertical housing estates, as opposed to the current production of exclusionary wealthy condos and the shrinkage of 'affordable' housing stock. Students have engaged with the reality of the Royal Docks and more specifically Silvertwon Quays, provocatively proposing socially inclusive housing projects in an area which, during the summerLab, they have heard being rather conceived 'for the visionaries'[7].

Finally, the reader will be pleased to find on the back-cover the dates for the DPU summerLab 2016 series: workshops will take place in San Juan (Puerto Rico), Beirut (Lebanon), Palermo (Italy), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Barcelona (Spain) and London. Once again, we will work with a wide spectrum of local partners – grassroots organisations and local universities, architectural and art collectives, research platforms, local authorities. Participants will experience the mushrooming of community-based initiatives in Puerto Rico, question the opportunity for the politico-ecological recuperation of a neglected river in Beirut and the areas in its proximity, deconstruct the impact and relevance of migrant urbanisms in Palermo. In Mostar, they will see how a number of very

peculiar urban voids have been turned into contested spaces, and partake in the debate on their possible future. An area in the periphery of Barcelona will be the privileged ground for a critical understanding of the spatial implications of the sudden convergence of newcomers from the most diverse contexts and cultural backgrounds. Finally, in London, participants will experience the interplay and struggle between the plan for a new gigantic development by the River Thames and the site's past histories and heritage values.

As in the previous summerLab series, we have shaped the 2016 programmes in order to allow a thorough understanding of a place's transformative potentials instead of over-imposing a totalising and reductive design brief. In the summerLab, the effort and commitment toward thinking design research as an investigation around potentialities consists in an ethical shift, a gesture that render inoperative and able to deactivate its communicative and informative function of design as product, in order to open it to new possible uses, new possibilities.[8] Design research in this sense does not partake of a populist approach to design, nor does it want to configure as insurgency against a hegemonic debate. Rather, it wants to posit a subversive ethos to the dominant ontology of enactment or praxis, infused with the arrogant ego of creative power to produce and control spatial realities. Only in this way, we can reconfigure urban and architectural around the 'work of man',[9] as the purest expression of an urban environment and its political selves.

1 See also: Astolfo.G., Talocci, G., Boano, C., (2015) A six-fold mandate for an engaged urban design research education, Urban Pamphleteer Vol. 5., p.43-45. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/urbanlab/research/urban-pamphleteer/UrbanPamphleteer-5

2 Findeli, A. (2012) Searching for Design Research Questions: Some Conceptual Clarifications. In: S. Grand & W. Jonas (eds.) Mapping Design Research. Barcelona/Basel: Birkhauser Architecture, pp.123–134.

3 This volume, page 12.

4 This volume, page 24.

5 This volume, page 32.

6 This volume, page 44.

7 Quoting the Silvertown Partnership, see: http://brownfieldbriefing.com/36554/newham-approves-silvertown-development

8 See also: Boano, C., Talocci, G. (2014) The (in)operative power: architecture and the reclaim of social relevance. STUDIO magazine (6), p. 24.

Boano, C., Astolfo, G., (2015) A New Use of Architecture. The Political Potential of Agamben's Common Use, ARQ Vol. 91, pp: 15-25.

9 Agamben, G. (2007) The Work of Man. In: Calarco, M., DeCaroli, S. (eds) Sovereigny and Life, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 1-9.

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