

Designing Politics: the limits of design

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What are the limits of design in addressing the political and/or when has design not been enough? A collection of thought pieces written by Theatrum Mundi's Designing Politics Working Group following a workshop at the Villa Vassiliev in Paris on 25th May 2016. This working group is supported by the Global Cities Chair at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris.

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Introduction

Theatrum Mundi

What are the limits of design in addressing the political and/or when has design not been enough? This question lies at the heart of Designing Politics, an ongoing project at Theatrum Mundi. Now in its third year of organising ideas challenges in cities around the world, Theatrum Mundi gathered a group of architects, academics, artists and activists in May 2016 to reflect on the questions it asks, and the fundamental relationship between design and politics. Below is a short introduction to the broader programme of work that emerged from 2012 and so far has produced three challenges: New York (2014), London (2015) and Rio de Janeiro (2016). This provides a background to the reflections that follow.

What can the 'street' learn from the 'stage'?

Theatrum Mundi asks fundamental questions about urban culture by bringing people from the performing and visual arts in dialogue with people from the built environment disciplines, like architects, urban planners, as well as academics and civil society groups thinking about the politics of their cities. As an organisation Theatrum Mundi asks what can we learn about the challenges, opportunities and inequalities of urban culture by bringing the important and vastly different knowledges from music, theatre, dance, photography, film or sculpture, for example, together with people tasked in pragmatic and compromising ways to create the physical spaces in which we live? In Richard Sennett's words, the founder of Theatrum Mundi, what can the 'street' learn from the 'stage' and vice versa.

The Designing Politics ideas challenge format has its roots from 2012 in a small discussion group that Theatrum Mundi organised in New York on the question of 'Social Movement'. This group was made up of people thinking about

'movement' in different ways: dancers and choreographers, transport planners, and people involved in social movements and activism. Fresh on the heels of the Occupy Movement that spread around the globe, this group wondered what it might look like for a design challenge to address major political questions.

Two years later, that idea formed the basis for the first in Theatrum Mundi's series of ideas challenges on 'Designing Politics': 'Designing for Free Speech' based in New York. This was a purposefully provocative consideration of the intensification of the privatisation and securitisation of urban space, against the politics of the Occupy Movement and similar long-standing counter-publics. The challenge asked, Can we design for free speech? What are the limits of formal design in relationship to the USA Constitution's Second Amendment?

What was exciting as an organisation was to see the responses. Some took up the notion that to design for free speech was to literally enhance the voice – that is to design physical elements that would make someone's voice louder in a public space so that they could share what was on their mind. Others suggested there is no space for free speech anymore in New York, and so proposed in satirical fashion the construction of a floating agora in the Hudson river: free speech in exile. Still others suggested that proposing the idea that one could 'design' for 'free speech' is preposterous to begin with – suggesting it amounted to social engineering. For this group, free speech was a legal or constitutional issue, not one related to physical design or performative or visual cultures.

For Theatrum Mundi, the breadth and explosive imagination put into the challenge was as exciting as it was a sign that thinking the relationship of design to politics remains an important task. The fact that there were people offering critique of the very question Theatrum Mundi was asking is a signal of the importance in putting it out there for debate.

In 2015, Theatrum Mundi organised the second ideas challenge 'Designing the Urban Commons' in London. This iteration followed the same method as in New York. However, it asked a question about ownership, stewardship and collective practice in relationship to the historic question of the

commons, and its related verb: commoning.

While the commons initially makes one think of collective actions, making resources commonly owned, maintained, and equally distributed, they also ask questions about an individual's ability to participate in commoning. The 'Commons Economy Generator' was one entry that looked more like an organigram than an architectural design. As an idea it was 'designed to facilitate communication between existing commons groups' in order to share skills, resources, funds. Equally, it would enable new commons to form, and help distribute the benefits from commons-based economies to people or groups who are not part of them. It was a commons for the commons. On the face of it, a prime example of the fundamentally communal question the commons raises not just to their internal organisation, but between multiple commons groups that might exist in a single city. But the core elements it aims to address – the sharing of skills, of resources, of funds, points downward in some way to the individual energy and capacity that make up each common and contribute to their commoning. Who is part of these commons? Who has the time to common, or contribute to a community based on the ethos of the commons? What kinds of skills are valued? What are the sociological or historical barriers that persist in the contemporary that mean some groups 'common' while others don't? Suggesting a collective way to address some of the themes of burn out, lack of funding, or capacity building, in effect ways to address the sustainability of commons activities, raises questions about some underlying urban inequalities along class, race, gender, age, ability, or geographic bias.

The third global ideas challenge took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. In Rio de Janeiro, Theatrum Mundi partnered with People's Palace Projects, the Museu do Amanhã, Spectaculu and the Museu de Arte do Rio on the theme of 'Designing Respect'. The notion of 'respect' as a political question emerged out of a seminar in Rio de Janeiro with a broad cross-section of experts and practitioners from architecture and design, to theatre, sculpture, dance, music, journalism, city government, activism and civic organising. Over a rich and complex debate, the theme of 'respect' emerged as something that cuts across the various social, cultural and economic inequities woven into the physical fabric of Rio de Janeiro and its everyday

experience by people separated by gulfs in wealth, and in the places in which they live.

As was the case with the definition of 'free speech' and of 'the commons' in our previous editions, the definition of 'respect' is very much up for debate and becomes defined by the submissions themselves. In the brief for this ideas challenge, however, the aim was to expand it beyond its more conservative history of 'respect for authority,' or 'respectability,' and even its more progressive tones of 'respecting your neighbours' or 'respect for difference' as important as those are, to questions about respect for democratic institutions, or about respect as a signal for equity in terms of access or the right to the city. Could housing be about respect? Or equitable transport or mobility in the city a question of respect? Or about racial profiling in police tactics, or structural class violence? Respect becomes a broad category for thinking socially and politically about the physical design of the city, and therefore how it might collectively improved upon. In an era of heightened inequality, of racial and class violence, of territorial stigmatisation, can respect become politicised?

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As a programme of work, Designing Politics activates different scales and temporalities of knowledge, and in this third year of work, Theatrum Mundi initiated a workshop to invite critical reflections on the core question of the limits and possibilities of design in addressing political questions. We hope the following set of short provocations ignite further commentary and debate, and we encourage you to get in touch and join the conversation.

I am not going to speak about the present, but about the past: about the foundations on which our democracy is based. These foundations were rooted in cities, in their civic spaces. We need to remember this history to think about how democratic cities should be made today.

A democracy supposes people can consider views other than their own. This was Aristotle's notion in the *Politics*. He thought the awareness of difference occurs only in cities, since the every city is formed by synoikismos, a drawing together of different families and tribes, of competing economic interests, of natives with foreigners.

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"Difference" today seems about identity -- we think of race, gender, or class. Aristotle's meant something more by difference; he included also the experience of doing different things, of acting in divergent ways which do not neatly fit together. The mixture in a city of action as well as identity is the foundation of its distinctive politics. Aristotle's hope was that when a person becomes accustomed to a diverse, complex milieu he or she will cease reacting violently when challenged by something strange or contrary. Instead, this environment should create an outlook favourable to discussion of differing views or conflicting interests. Almost all modern urban planners subscribe to this Aristotelian principle. But if in the same space different persons or activities are merely concentrated, but each remains isolated and segregated, diversity loses its force. Differences have to interact.

Classical urbanism imagines two kinds of spaces in which this interaction could occur. One was the pnyx, an amphitheatre in which citizens listened to debates and took collective decisions; the other was the agora, the town square in which people were exposed to difference in a more raw, unmediated form.

The Pnyx was a bowl-shaped, open-air theatre about ten minutes' walk from the central square of Athens. Chiselled out of a hill, the Pnyx in form resembled other Greek theatres, and like them originally provided space for dancing and plays. In the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BC, Athenians put this ordinary theatre to a different use, in seeking for order in their politics. Speakers stood in the open, round space on a stone platform called a bema, so that they could be seen by everyone in the theatre; behind the speaker the land dropped away, so that words seemed to hover in the air between the mass of five to six thousand bodies gathered together and the empty sky; the sun from morning to late afternoon struck the speaker's face so that nothing in his expression or gestures was obscured by shadow. The audience for this political theatre sat around the bowl in assigned places, men sitting with others who belonged to the same local tribe. The citizens watched each other's reactions as intently as the orator at the bema.

People sat or stood in this relation for a long time -- as long as the sunlight lasted. The theatrical space thus functioned as a detection mechanism, its focus and duration meant to get beneath the surface of momentary impressions. And such a disciplinary space of eye, voice, and body had one great virtue: through concentration of attention on a speaker and identification of others in the audience who might call out challenges or comments, the ancient political theatre sought to hold citizens responsible for their words.

In the Pnyx, two visual rules thus organized the often raucous meetings at which people took decisions: exposure, both of the speaker and of the audience to one another, and fixity of place, in where the speaker stood and the audience sat. These two visual rules supported a verbal order: a single voice speaking at any one time.

The other space of democracy was the Athenian agora. The town square consisted of a large open space crossed diagonally by the main street of Athens; at the sides of the agora were temples and buildings called stoas, the latter sheds with an open side onto the agora. A number of activities occurred simultaneously in the agora -- commerce, religious rituals, casual hanging out. In the open space lay also a rectangular law court, surrounded by a low wall, so that citizens banking or making an offering to the gods, could also follow the progress of justice. The stoa helped resolve this confusion; as one moved inside the building out of the open space, one moved from a public realm in which citizens freely intermingled into more private spaces. The rooms at the back of the stoas were used for dinner parties and private meetings. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the stoa was the transition space just under the shelter of the roof on the open side; here one could retreat yet keep in touch with the square.

The Athenian agora made differences among male citizens interact in two ways. First, in the open space of the agora there were few visual barriers between events occurring at the same time, so that men did not experience physical compartmentalization. As a result, in coming to the town square to deal with a banker, you might be suddenly caught up in a trial occurring in the law court, shouting out your own opinion or simply taking in an unexpected problem. Secondly, the agora established a space for stepping back from engagement. This occurred at the edge, just under the roof of the stoa on its open side; here was a fluid, liminal zone of transition between private and public.

These two principles of visual design, lack of visual barriers but a well-defined zone of transition between public and private, shaped people's experience of language. The flow of speech was less continuous and singular than in the Pnyx; in the agora, communication through words became more fragmentary, as people moved from one scene to another. The operations of the eye were correspondingly more active and varied in the agora than in the Pnyx; a person standing under the stoa roof looked out, his eye searching, scanning. In the Pnyx the eye was fixed on a single scene, that of the orator standing at the bema; at most, the observer scanned the reactions of people sitting elsewhere, fixed in their seats.

This ancient example illustrates how the making of theatres and town squares can be put to democratic use. The theatre organizes the sustained attention required for decision-making; the square is a school for the often fragmentary, confusing experience of diversity. The square prepares people for debate; the theatre visually disciplines their debating.

The most urgent social requirement for democratic deliberation today is that people concentrate rather than “surf” social reality.

This is, of course, in principle. Throughout their long history, these two urban forms have been put to many divergent or contrary uses. We need only think of the Nazi spectacles in Germany to summon an image of theatrically-focused attention dedicated to totalitarian ends.

Yet the most urgent social requirement for democratic deliberation today is that people concentrate rather than “surf” social reality. It is for this reason that I've come to believe that designers need to pay attention to the architecture of theatres as possible political spaces. Live theatre aims at concentrating the attention of those within it. To achieve sustained attention, to commit people to one another even when the going gets rough or becomes boring, to unpack the meaning of arguments, all require a disciplinary space for the eye and the voice.

When people ask me to sum up my recent research on urban planning, architecture and the politics of the city in Mexico, I usually put the argument like this: ‘architecture isn’t built, it’s written’.

It’s a statement that is both true and untrue, flattening and full of complexity. But the ambiguity of the argument opens up to multiple lines of inquiry concerned with the question of something like the limits of design to politics, or perhaps and in a similar vein, the seeming boundedness of politics to forms of visual representation. Equally, it suggests a debate into the location of architecture, or what it is we look at, or look for, when asking questions about the politics of architecture and urban planning. The building? The drawing of the building? The writing done before and after that form the brief, the specifications, the contracts, the justifications, the criticism?

We know that the history of the built environment is rife with writing: manifestoes, essays, thought pieces, policy documents, law, criticism, architectural justifications, statistical analysis, sales brochures, academic work, and the list goes on. From early metaphors of the city as a body (read illness, circulation, viruses, cancerous areas, head and heart and hands, etc.), to late metaphors of the city as nature (read open or closed system, balance, ecology, flows, etc.), to renewed metaphors about the city from a twentieth to a twenty-first-century machine (smart, connected, instant, digital, virtual, etc.), writing and its metaphors are as powerful as the materials that script our daily embodied movement.

I want to argue, then, that writing, language, metaphor, and rhetoric are as much fundamentals of architecture, urbanism, design (and politics), as are more formal, physical, or bodied gestures. This line of inquiry is indebted to scholars like Beatriz Colomina, Kent Kleinman, and more recently Jane M Jacobs, who are expanding the definition of what counts as architecture, as well as suggesting critical ways in which we can better understand the

coconstitution of the built environment between these multiple mediums.¹ That is to say, to think the politics of design, or the relation of design to politics, must include a careful consideration of language, of translation, of genealogy and of the power and possibility of writing. We must move beyond the traditional and fetishist view of the material building, or material urban intervention as the prime location of political possibility.

A recent example of this demonstrates the power and the historically, pedagogically, and geographically embedded entanglements of a word: public. The past two years I worked on a project looking to compare public space design in London and São Paulo, both across geography, but also time. We looked at designs from both the period of high-modernism (1960-70s) and contemporary examples from 2010 onwards.

Architecture isn’t built,
it’s written.

As a sociologist working in an architecture school there were many moments of challenge and learning across disciplines, but at least we were working on one core theme. Or so I thought. Months into the research, at a workshop in São Paulo, I presented an overview of some of the literature from Sociology, Geography, Anthropology and History on public space. At the end, I was asked a question by my colleague, an architect by training with a practice focussed on public space design in London, why every time I spoke about public space, I was always talking about political struggle, about contestation, about protest, about the defence of public space, and about trying to rethink its political meaning in a contemporary city? It was hard to give an answer, but I suggested it might be because of the way I had been trained to see and think this word ‘public space’ through a sociological lens.

In response, my colleague suggested that when they think of public space, as a designer, they are trying to maximise happiness. That is, in their words, when designing a public space, they were thinking about how to make it

the nicest place to walk one's dog, or to really be able to sit, breathe, relax and have a cappuccino, to create a space where everyone might be able to experience the affect of publicness and serenity in a difficult, fragmented and constrained city.

It would be easy to dismiss both our pedagogical lenses as delimiting, but it does point to the stark differences in our understandings of the core working language of the project: public space. We began without interrogating our precise meanings, definitions and working histories with the term, nor to think through our biases based on those histories.

While this is the beginning of a working group on design politics, I think it is essential to think about the politics of writing and the specificities of language. This will be important within our collective work, and equally within the way in which we structure, disassemble, and hopefully renew a language of thinking the limits of design to questions of the political.

1 See Beatriz Colomina, 1994. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, Woburn, MA: MIT Press; Jane M. Jacobs, 2006. 'A geography of big things.' *Cultural Geographies*, 13(1), pp.1-27; Kleinman, K., 2007. 'Archiving/Architecture.' In *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 54-60; Gillian Rose & Divya Praful Tolia-Kelly, 2012. *Visuality/ Materiality: Images, Objects and Practices*, London: Ashgate Publishing Company.

John Bingham-Hall

What are the limits of design in addressing political challenges? We might first want to ask: which politics? The 'small p' politics of everyday, negotiated, shared space suggested by the Greek root of the word (*politika* – affairs of the city; or *politikos* – relating to citizens)? This scale of quotidian interpersonal politics in the public realm concerns fundamentally material issues such as the right to presence and visibility in and practical agency over urban space. But what about the 'big P' Politics¹ of parties, legislation, and bureaucracy, that is less immediately material? Evidently there is no clear line between the two, and so I would like to start by looking at a failure in design for Politics to open up questions for a more material and aesthetic discussion of design for politics.

Wood is intimate. It is
for building a hut, not a
parliament.

In 1999 Foster and Partners completed a renovation of the Reichstag in Berlin, including a glass cupola over the chamber, "allowing people to ascend symbolically above the heads of their representatives".² This is just the most recent in a series of post-war German parliament buildings constructed around what Deborah Barnstone calls an "ideology of transparency", posited by futurist design thinkers and almost entirely uncritically taken hold of in both architecture and politics as the material embodiment of the ideal of accountable, accessible government.³ However, rather than creating a system for transparent democracy, this design takes the most literal meaning of the word 'transparent' and looks for its material equivalent in glass. It conflates a material fact – the ability for glass to convey a complete image – with a *way of doing things*. If transparency in politics has meaning only as far as being able to see what politicians

are doing, then within the scope of its setting the glass dome succeeds. If, as we would hope, it is supposed to be a tool for holding the political system accountable through involvement, it fails. The kind of transparency it creates is the same as that set up in the theatre between stage and audience: information and affect passes in one direction; the public is a set of eyes rather than a set of interlocutors. Because we inherited a word for information passing through material to approximate the way information passes between political actors and the public, the representation of democracy in glass has been able, at times, to supersede the process of democracy itself.

The Campo de Cebada in Madrid has become one of the best known spaces for bottom-up democracy. Following a series of assemblies debating the future of the vacant, city-owned public site, lightweight shelters and bleachers were constructed from recycled wood allowing it to be used for peer-to-peer education, performance, and local democracy. Built on the basis of necessity for and by its users, it appears on the surface to be the epitome of material functionalism. Why, then, is its aesthetic so instantly recognizable? Why have ply and wooden boarding come to be so expressive of (small-p) political? There are obvious pragmatic reasons: they are cheap and durable. But there are also ways of doing things encoded in these materials. Could ergonomic properties of materials could become political? Take weight: how many humans and/or non-humans does it take to lift a plate of glass versus a plank of wood? Ply and scaffold can be manipulated by non-specialists, giving us a 'DIY' ethic/aesthetic/politic. Even at this most seemingly pragmatic a relationship with materials there is a conflation of language that blurs the functional and symbolic. Grass-roots or DIY political organization literally uses the same tools and materials as home improvements, borrowing a material way of doing things and inheriting with it a symbolic aesthetic of the intimacy of the domestic interior.

Wood is intimate. It is for building a hut, not a parliament. It belongs to the world of communality and physical affect, which Hannah Arendt distinguishes clearly from the world of the Political.⁴ But wood also contains things within it and traps them: it does not transmit information. It holds affect at the scale of the intimate and the immediate. Glass is implicated in

the technologies of mass media. It allows mediated affect to pass through it whilst keeping bodies apart. Just as the Reichstag fails in doing Political transparency because of its literally symbolic interpretation, it succeeds in doing other things like the communication of power outwards from a centre. Just because its symbolism does not equal its function, does not mean we should not pay attention to its functionality. Inversely with wood at the Campo de Cebada: it is highly effective in *doing* DIY politics, economically and ergonomically, but in doing so symbolizes a communality and an immediacy that puts it in aesthetic opposition to Politics. This may well be the aim, but then how does it scale up, expand, and grow as a movement whilst holding on to the material symbols it has created for itself? Does wood symbolically trap the political in the realm of the intimate, shared between initiates to that realm, and exclude a wider public?

- 1 Capitalisation observed to distinguish throughout
- 2 <http://www.fosterandpartners.com/projects/reichstag-new-german-parliament/>
- 3 Deborah Ascher Barnstone, *The Transparent State: Architecture and Politics in Postwar Germany* (Routledge, 2004).
- 4 Hannah Arendt, "The Public Realm: The Common," in *The Public Face of Architecture*, ed. Mark Lilla and Nathan Glazer (London & New York: The Free Press, 1987), 4–12.

Hillary Angelo

My own work is on urban green space, so my comments on the question at hand are oriented toward that context. Understanding “the political” in terms of general democratic accessibility, three limits of design come to mind.

First, designs will be limited based on what designers can know or imagine about the conventions of a space’s use. Designers asked to design for politics must come up with some definition of what good politics looks like—and the spaces they produce will inevitably reflect designers’ particular biases and normative assumptions in ways that directly affect the inclusivity of those spaces. For instance, parks and urban public green tend to reflect quite culturally and historically specific assumptions about what forms of engagement with the environment are desirable or appropriate, and what kinds of activities and social interactions are good to cultivate through design. (Though of course relatively “open” designs are less subject to this.)

Thinking about design
for democracy also begs
the question of how to
democratise design.

Second, design can’t address the unequal outcomes and adverse consequences of the broader political and economic context in which projects take place. For example, a paradox of urban greening projects is that efforts to increase the liveability of urban areas by adding green public space also make them more desirable and therefore more expensive—often displacing those who stood to benefit the most from improvements, who are also frequently those who advocated for the improvements in the

first place. The result is that design-based efforts to improve democratic accessibility within a certain space may make the broader geographic area (the neighbourhood surrounding a park, for example) less inclusive as they contribute to making them more expensive. This is not a problem of design but of geopolitical context, and accordingly tools to combat it lie outside of design itself, such as rent regulation or political activism.

Third, thinking about design for democracy also begs the question of how to democratize design (thanks to Theatrum Mundi friend and fellow participant, Gianpaolo Baiocchi, for this point). How can we democratize the design process itself, not only to create good designs but a process that is responsive to non-expert views on what good design is? The many arguments against “participatory design” suggest that we haven’t yet figured out how to democratize this domain. Tokenistic or legislated forms of participation have become substitutes for truly inclusive processes. Laypeople are ill-equipped to give designers information they can translate into realistic and affordable plans. In community-based processes, the most well-organized and well-resourced constituencies tend to have the loudest voices, and may or may not represent the interests of the whole. In terms of design outcomes, tastes differ and possibilities are constrained. So what does a successful democratic design process look like?

This all sounds very dark, but I do not mean to suggest that design does not have an important role to play in politics, nor even that these are limitations that can or should be overcome. Rather, these are common and predictable patterns and problems that we might just keep in mind when undertaking any self-consciously political design or design process.

Tom Dobson

The art and architecture practice *public works*¹ aim to investigate what constitutes the civic in the city and how to re-design the structures that restrict it. One current project in Loughborough Junction revolves around a citizen-led community garden and is no doubt political. What is interesting is that through researching this project, the aspects which we ‘design’ are much more around the governance, funding and legislation that enable the whole thing to exist in the first place—the aesthetic (though it is also political) is secondary.

Now it feels these processes need to be designed more than ever following a shift in approach of how local councils deal with public space in an era of austerity. Luckily Lambeth Council (where the garden is based) is using some foresight to hang on to their public land (for now) rather than simply sell it for a short term economic return, as we see elsewhere. What has emerged instead is a new methodology of austerity-led civic space creation. The council take public land and resources, package it up, and hand it to a private entity to take care of. This private entity brings its own funding, creates the civic space, and shoulders all the risk and reward that comes with it - leaving the council to deal with it at arm’s length. The problem is these spaces are not very civic at all. In initial cases, such as Pop Brixton in South London, this has seen a private entity take public assets and begin to profit from them by creating new exclusive spaces of consumption that cater predominantly to an external market rather than a local one. The private entity is not accountable to the public so has no obligation - the failure lies in the agreement between the council and this private entity.

Now we have a similar opportunity with our community garden in Loughborough Junction and of course the fear of local residents is that Pop Brixton gets replicated into Pop Loughborough and only serves to aid the process of gentrification. We don’t want a private entity, whose morals can become corrupted as soon as the financial spreadsheet takes a turn for

the worse, to manage the garden. What we need to design is a governance framework for a new civic institution that can fill this role. A new civic institution that can operate at arm’s length from the council, allowing for responsive programming, reduced red tape, and increased citizen autonomy, whilst bound to a code of ethics that ensures it acts in the interest of the local area. There are many examples of how this could work - co-operative models, steering groups, community land trusts, and community interest companies, to name but a few. We just need to implement them creatively.

What we need to design is a governance framework for a new civic institution

This needs to go hand-in-hand with legislation that allows these governance structures to emerge. The 2011 Localism Act represents a government shift to making policies that have the potential to enable and empower citizens. Citizens can invest themselves into it, subvert it and exploit it (as private companies do with legislation), so it starts to level the playing field. Following the Localism Act we see Neighbourhood Forums appearing like rhizomes each trying to address urban planning issues in their locality. Could these new forums become the platform for residents to become their own developers? Building truly affordable housing, helping develop ‘civic’ spaces such as our community garden and ensuring the economic and social opportunities benefit the local - not external forces. We need to design more legislations such as the Localism Act and crucially we need to design a mechanism for releasing funding that can allow these new governance structures to actually challenge potential competitors - or we need a shift in value systems that allow the true value of our ‘right to the city’ to be recognised.

1 <http://www.publicworksgroup.net/>

Sarah Bastide

As an architecture practice, at Encore Heureux we believe in the collective process of making. The widespread and constant search for ever greater performances and efficiency - technological, environmental, agricultural, industrial, as much as individual and collective—of the last 50 years or so has led to increasing specialisations. Specialisations in the fields of study, competencies, liabilities, in the way we work, think and live. In what we are expected to be and what we let ourselves hope to become.

To reverse this trend, we often refer to two simple quotes.

The first one belongs to a teacher of ours, from the late 90's. He used to ask us: *“Do you know the difference between an architect and an engineer? The engineer knows everything about nothing. The architect knows nothing about everything.”*

The second one belongs to an internationally under-recognized architect and theorist, Lucien Kroll. Opposing the “rationalist” way of approaching an issue, a challenge or a project, and the “incrementalist” one: *“L'incrémentaliste, lui, fait son action de A à Z en commençant par A-B. Et à B, il s'arrête, tremblant, en regardant tous les désastres qu'il a faits derrière lui, parce que, forcément, les actions entraînent des conséquences inimaginables. Il sait que ce sont des conséquences, il définit lesquelles, et surtout il définit les auteurs de ces conséquences et négocie avec eux. Donc il n'arrive jamais à B. Et il n'arrive jamais à Z. Et entre-temps, il s'aperçoit que ses interlocuteurs sont des êtres-vivants, qui ont une opinion, un mode de vie et une existence simplement. Et qu'une question - qui n'a pas l'air tout de même accessoire - est de savoir si, à Z, ils existent encore ou si l'humanité a disparu.”*¹

To design is fundamentally and inherently a collective experience. As designers or architects we do not imagine, create and produce objects

alone, as isolated individuals. To believe so would be oblivious and fictional at best, or plainly ignorant and arrogant. For one, we are all steeped in our surroundings, in our *habitus*, as defined by the French sociologue Pierre Bourdieu, our socio-political environment, cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and so on and so forth. But even on a more down-to-earth perspective, the “thinker” never thinks alone nor for him or herself only. The creative force of one's mind needs the intelligence of someone else's hands, the knowledge and skills of the craftsman's techniques, the eye, body and senses of the users or passer-by. We could even take another step backward, go a bit further up into the process of designing and wonder what would the designer do without someone's problem to solve?

As a collective experience, design is bound to be political. Why so? Without delving into those considerations too far or too long, as it is not our domain of “specialisation”, we will just travel back to the ancient Greek *politikos*, or what is “of, for, or relating to citizens” and to Aristotle's *politika*, “affairs of the cities”, of the common, to define what we mean by “political” in this writing.

To design is fundamentally and inherently a collective experience.

From those short reflections we would like to draw two conclusions, that really are rather mere invitations. The first one would be a recognition, in Lucien Kroll's steps, of the act of designing or building as a transversal, horizontal, human and relational act that engages our responsibilities. We live in a web of interconnections, of infra-relations within super-structures. In order not to be stripped of our political capabilities, to remain at the heart of what we do and why we do it, we should embrace an “ecological” way of thinking and acting and thus to “prefer relations to results”²

Hence our second invitation: to respect the materials we design and build with, as well as the people we design and build with or for. To take into account their stories and history, resilience, potential, will and capabilities.

1 Definition given by Lucien Kroll during a lecture at the Université Foraine of Rennes on November 2012. Quoted by Chloé Bodart in *Considérant*, texts compiled and introduced by Sébastien Thiéry, Post-éditions, mars 2014, p. 66. Could be translated as follow: “The incrementalist does his or her action from A to Z starting with A-B. Once at B he trembles and stops, looking at the disasters he provoked along his path, since, obviously, actions bring about unthought consequences. He knows they are consequences, defines them and, above all, defines the authors of those consequences and negotiates with them. He thus never makes it to B. And he never makes it to Z. Meanwhile however, he realizes that the persons he is speaking to are human beings, with an opinion, a way of living and, simply put, an existence. And so, a not so incidental question arises that is to know whether at Z they will still exist or if humanity will have disappeared.”

2 “L’architecture, l’urbanisme et le paysage deviennent écologiques lorsqu’ils préfèrent les relations aux résultats.” Thierry Paquot, préface de Simone et Lucien Kroll, *une architecture habitée*, sous la direction de Patrick Bouchain, Actes Sud Beaux Arts, Hors Collection, 2013.

Adriana Cobo Corey

I will consider three aspects of architectural design which look into the limits of spatial practices in addressing the political.¹

Architecture is a dependent profession

“...architecture at every stage of its existence -from design through construction to occupation- is buffeted by external forces. Other people, circumstances, and events intervene to upset the architect’s best laid plans. These forces are, to a greater or lesser extent, beyond the control of the architect.”²

By and of itself, architectural design performs within a limited field of action when addressing the political. Opening the architectural field to the delivery of sustained inclusive practice implies embracing wider networks including ‘non-experts’. This could not only expand the political scope of spatial design, but potentially engage design in devising longer term spatial and cultural maintenance structures.

Architecture can be complicit
in the exercise of authority

Architectural design is still driven by formal codes

‘...the basic dynamics of the architectural field are driven by symbolic concerns and the quest to achieve reputation through the production of great architecture, which is, of course, that which the field defines as great.’³

When the RIBA was established in 1835, architects were described as and expected to be men of taste. From then onwards, these men⁴ were officially established as the custodians of a precedent tradition, with its subsequent extension into the future as a project on taste. The institutionalisation of

the architect mainly as a form and taste provider has traditionally limited the agency of architecture in the design of more open politics and/or the politics of design. It has also limited the impact of architectural design as a long-term, inclusive political project.

Architecture can be complicit in the exercise of authority
*“Too often architecture is designed (and consequently comprehended) as a purely aesthetic or intellectual activity, ignoring social relations and rendering people passive. Architecture may thus, as monuments, express significance in the city, but it will simultaneously mask the structures of power that underlie it.”*⁵

Spatial design, intentionally or not, constructs and supports power structures. This contributes to emphasize the power of some social groups over others.⁶ The politics of specific sites could therefore be unveiled, and perhaps transformed, by spatial strategies interested in exploring the complicit connections between design and power. Privately-owned public spaces (POPS) are one example. Power structures ruling this kind of site question the extent to which spatial design can perform -working alongside, contributing to, or resisting- backstage-managed functional and formal scripts.

Architectural icons are often effective in the support of authority. But what lies behind form? Could the design of maintenance structures be included within design projects, in order to support the politics of participation in the longer term?

1 My on-going research investigates the connections between understandings of taste and the exercise of authority, in specific public spaces.

2 J. Till, *Architecture Depends* (MIT Press, 2009) p. 1

3 G. Stevens, *The Favored Circle: The social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (MIT Press, 1998) p. 95

4 As opposed to women, who were not given full RIBA membership until 1938

5 I. Borden, Kerr, J., Pivaro, A., Rendell, J., Eds., *Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* (MIT Press, 2011) p. 4

6 See LK Weisman, *Discrimination by design: A feminist critique of the man-made environment* (University of Illinois Press, 1994)

Claudio Sopranzetti

Designing is, ultimately, an act of reducing the diversity of reality to a plan, a model, or a convention for the realization of an objective. Design, whether in its modernist aspirations of absolute control or in its post-modernist attempts to organize contingency and be open-ended, remains a process of simplification and schematization. Design operates by reducing the complexity of reality to models, and through those models attempts to reorganizing it. It always imagines another reality: other forms of living, communicating, behaving, producing, loving.

The messiness and complexity of reality always trumps any attempt to shape it, to compose it, to design it.

In this sense, design has the same relation to reality that politics has to the political. Politics, in fact, is an institutionalized system that aims at governing, organizing, and codifying the political, which is a much larger field of action, one that often defies politics' attempts to codify it. Politics, like design, involves planning, decision and law-making and, like design, it is always an act of remaking reality through reduction. Similarly, both politics and design are bounded and haunted by this reduction. The messiness and complexity of reality always trumps any attempt to shape it, to compose it, to design it. In this sense, design-reality and politics-political exist in the same relation that the plan has to the city: needed in order to achieve certain objectives but, because of its reductionism, bounded to remain little more than a suggestion, a scribble, a starting point - clean and perfect on paper, messy and impossible to control out in the world.

As a result, design becomes limited - and counterproductive - when encountering the political unless it recognizes its reductionism, which is effective yet bounded to sclerotize and to ossify reality, or becomes aware of the political-economic implication of its own label. Calling something an act of design (as much as calling something politics) goes well beyond a technical or aesthetic judgement; it becomes an act of legitimization. And, as any act of legitimization, it entails an act of exclusion. As a result, when a fishermen fidgets with a net and comes up with a more effective way of weighing it down or a slum dweller devises a better system of water drainage, their acts are classified as ingenuity, practical sense, or local know-how. Conversely, when the well-dressed university-educated cappuccino-sipping “creative” builds a chair, that act is of “design.” Exactly the same way in which, when in a riot the unemployed loots a betting shop or a shopping mall, hundreds of voices raise to define such act as non-political, and corner it into irrationality, blind rage, or shopping with violence, while celebrating riding a bike to work as a political act.

So to conclude, two elements are central to this analysis of the relation between design and the political. Firstly, we need to recognize the very use of the label “design” as part of a political and economic order, in which value and legitimacy are created. Design as a category, therefore, does not just relate to the political, it is its own political-economic project, one in which value is generated through uniqueness. The proliferation of the word “design” conjures and it is symptomatic of a post-Fordist system of creation of surplus value, one in which the uniqueness of a piece, the ingenuity of its design, and what the resulting object comes to signify and represent in terms of identity is celebrated, and valued, over the mass production and celebration for seriality that dominated Fordist modes of production, circulation, and consumption. Secondly, we need to acknowledge that design is an act of reduction, and therefore of institutionalization, that creates a reality. In this sense, the ultimate political act is not that of designing, but rather of hijacking, hacking, and cracking the design, of finding its limits and backdoors and opening them up to challenges.

Pushpa Arabindoo Radical Design: From Ideology to Practice

Unusually, we find ourselves at a rare, feel-good historical moment, when we are supposed to be marking and (if we dare) celebrating 500 years of Thomas More’s inspirational text *Utopia*—an appropriate conjuncture to think ‘widely about the politics of design, and designing for politics’. And perhaps, with a little nudge, a gentle push, we can even realise Aureli’s ‘prophecy’ of a shift towards a repoliticisation of architecture, embracing once again the possibilities of radical critique.¹ This would of course require design to go beyond the mellow compromise of ‘radical realism’, a concession common in design as it remains caught within the vain demands of professionalism. Practically, it also means that design needs to roll its sleeves up to occupy a central role in restoring the public investment programme in housing, infrastructure, health, education and other associated welfare schemes that are now nearly extinct. In this matter, design cannot be faulted for not trying. The primal role of design in New Labour’s Urban Renaissance Agenda in the UK is well known, especially in driving key schemes such as the Building Schools for Future, one that came in for stinging criticism. Given this scepticism, should design try yet again to influence socio-political agendas? Would its efforts be predictably limited to meddling gestures? If so, is this simply (not) enough?

The politics of tactical
architecture cannot be so
easily dismissed.

Swyngedouw’s cryptic statement, that architecture cannot be an emancipatory project but architects can, encapsulate best the limits of design in addressing the political.² While he follows Tafuri’s argument that architecture is removed from any larger critique of capitalism and its unfolding cultural logic, he draws attention to the emergence of insurgent

architects who “may tentatively open a space for thinking through and acting on the necessity for a new socio-spatial order articulated around the disavowed signifiers of equality, freedom, solidarity and common management of the commons”.³ The risk here is that the metamorphosis of designers into political subjects takes place amidst a post-political consensus that is not only reactionary but also forestalls the articulation of design as a counter-narrative to the facets of neoliberal urbanism. It is this context that frames Brenner’s scepticism of tactical urbanism and insurgent architecture where he cautions that even though such design defies politics as we know it, these gestures are unable to disrupt basic rule-regimes associated with market-oriented, growth-first urban development.⁴ This is a tentative criticism which is cautious not only about these small-scale interventions but also fears about their wider currency rooted as they are in a localised politics of subversion.

And yet, the politics of tactical architecture cannot be so easily dismissed without thoroughly exploring its practical abilities to offer a robust interpretive frame for understanding a variety of emergent urban design experiments in cities across the global North and South, an exercise involving not just joining the dots but also discerning a more nuanced and complex pattern. It also means reaching a point where the tactics of insurgent design are a rule and not an exception, a difficult prospect when faced with the continued corporatisation of design. More than its ideological association with capitalism, our concern here is with the practice-dominated prioritisation of design as a technological fix. It means design as a process that is less concerned with social analysis (despite repeated assertions) or the larger questions of political economy, and more with the demands of developers, engineers and planners. A continued focus on the broader system of real estate-led development rules ensures that design remains caught within the entrapment of a ‘field’ with less chances of developing a sophisticated discourse as a discipline. For the latter to happen, we need to think of design not only as a meta-narrative but also in terms of its everyday practice. A first step is to loosen the rigid hierarchical impositions of scale where architecture, urban design and planning operate at distinct micro and macro levels. It requires a radical rethinking of design not as a spatially circumscribed intervention but as a multiscalar process cutting

across multiple sites, places, and territories. This is an issue when design follows the conventional norms of project-based initiatives with a tightly defined redline boundary, one that does not interrupt the broader systems of property based investment and displacement. In order to overcome this challenge, we will need to return to the drawing board, or back to the classroom, i.e. reconsider the pedagogy of radical design as practice. In all likelihood, we will be opening a new can of worms, a confrontation that we unfortunately cannot avoid.

1 P.V. Aureli, *The project of autonomy: Politics and architecture within and against capitalism* (Buell Center/FORuM Project and Princeton Architectural Press, 2008)

2 E. Swyngedouw, *On the impossibility of an emancipatory architecture: The deadlock of critical theory, insurgent architects, and the beginning of politics*, in *Can architecture be an emancipatory project? Dialogues on architecture and the left* (Zero Books, 2016)

3 (n.p.)

4 N. Brenner, *Is ‘tactical urbanism’ an alternative to neoliberal urbanism?* http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/587-is-tactical-urbanism-an-alternative-to-neoliberal-urbanism (2015)

Can design be non-political?

Is design not always a manifestation of the socio-economic and political context in which it is conceived? Depending on the type of design, does it not either enforce, or act against, that political context within which it operates? When we talk about non-political design, are we not instead referring to design which perpetuates the prevailing mainstream socio-economic and political narrative or orthodoxy in which it is developed?

Today's mainstream design seems to focus mainly on responding to the needs of security and profitability. Beside them lie personal comfort, sustainability and "smart"-ness, but most often these are merely facades for the former. There are exceptions, but they are offered as an alternative or in opposition to the main trend.

Can design be non-political?

At the same time the profession of the architect is being progressively eroded. It has been reduced to the production of illusory eye-catching renders alongside the administration of often useless time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. From the small to the large scale people question if they need an architect at all, and if the role is not redundant amongst the myriad of technical experts on one hand, and on the other the common knowledge that we all believe ourselves to hold.

In navigating this context as designers, we have to repeatedly compromise our ideals to be able to survive in today's low-waged competitive market. I do ask myself though: to what point have we all become tacitly complicit with this system?

In most countries qualified architects must commit to specific obligations towards the public interest and the environment in which they operate.

How often are these obligations overlooked or ignored: by us, by our clients, and by society?

Is it not time to reclaim our role as designers and acknowledge that not only we play an important part in shaping socio-economic and political dynamics, but also that we have an incumbent responsibility towards society and the planet in doing so?

If design is a powerful tool to shape the future, then how can we use it to move towards a better world than today?

I would like to suggest some initial steps that I hope can lead us in the right direction:

1. The world around us is changing so rapidly that we need to embrace iterative and participative forms of design that allow us to experiment and learn in parallel while developing schemes that foster the growth of the positive initiatives that are already present.
2. A myriad of new economic and technological innovations are growing around us (platforms, open source, commons, etc.). We need to understand how they work, their potentials, and their downfalls, so as to learn how to implement them to the best effect in our design.
3. There is an urgency in understanding, learning and educating ourselves on the mechanisms by which economics, finance and politics inform design, and vice-versa (i.e. land value, PFI, mortgage segregation, tax etc.) so as to protect and develop appropriately our common resources.
4. We need to have a more public and critical voice, generating productive debate with the general public and within institutions, openly opposing and resisting negative forces, while nurturing and fostering positive initiatives.
5. We need vision and direction, so as to inform the iterative steps we take, to identify the positive forces to build on, and the negative ones that are pulling us in the wrong direction.

Mona Sloane

Thoughts on the ‘problem’ of design

We are asking the wrong question. Design always is political, because it always is social. It is a powerful and unavoidable exercise in social imagination. Designers are tasked with thinking through how we *will* live, not how we *do* live. In that sense, designers occupy a very powerful position in shaping our societies.

The results of designers acting as social theorists in that way can fundamentally change our way of life. Here, using the term ‘design’ broadly is crucial: not only spatial design, such as architecture, but also other forms of design, such as software and product design, are and have been hugely consequential. For example, the design of the iPhone has as much transformed our lives as has modernist planning and architecture.

But that design is (socially) intentional is neither a surprise nor the point here. Not least because design’s intentions can be disguised by all sorts of things, from pragmatic to economic and cultural motifs and narratives. Much more important is that design is “the intentional solution of a *problem*, by the creation of plans for a new sort of thing” as design philosopher Glenn Parsons put it in his new book.¹

Design always is political,
because it always is social.

So in order to end up with something designed, there needs to be a problem this design responds to, a problem the ‘new sort of thing’ seeks to solve. So the crux, then, is *who gets to define the problem?* And who gets to state that there even is a problem that needs solving? This should be the core question in relation to the ‘politics of design, and designing for politics’, and it is a question that comes way before asking about the limits of design.

Strictly speaking, such a question is no longer about designers and the cultural, economic and political convictions they bring to their profession, but extends to who tasks them with the design process and why. Very often, defining the problem is the business of different kinds of ‘experts’ and their way of claiming and maintaining authority in their professional field and beyond. This, without doubt, is fair enough, as we are ultimately in need of experts if we want to get things done.

But what if we think about design politics as a democratising process: what if the ‘experts’ that define the design problem are not only those who are skilled to build the solution (e.g. architects) but also those who have to live with this design solution? People are experts in their own lived worlds and can give valuable insight into what is really ‘problematic’ and where we might be heading in the future. So why not bring them to the table in the first place – not as part of consultations, but as part of ‘doing design’? If we push this process, then we might find out what design’s limits are in addressing the political.

¹ Glenn Parsons, *The Philosophy of Design*. (Polity, 2015), p. 11 (emphasis added)

Rodrigo Firmino

In my view it is impossible to separate any human action from politics. In *The Human Condition*, while commenting on Aristotle's *bios politikon*, Hannah Arendt¹ explains how, from all activities, there are only two that define the political condition of human communities, being action and speech. Whether present or not in the original intentionality of designers and architects, I believe design is a political statement and that it has the power of translating sociotechnical assemblages into action and speech. Perhaps the process of translation will not always be clear and transparent, but design can, simultaneously, speak for its "conceivers" and/or "users" and provoke actions of sociospatial transformation, as well as actions of usage of certain parts of space.

I also dare to say that design is never enough.

I think that processes of territorialisation, and therefore spatial control and management, explain how action and speech are rendered into spatial configurations by the hands and intentions of designers (and the social networks behind them). There are necessarily two moments for this translation to occur.

The first and most obvious is the one that precedes planning/building, dependent on the social, cultural, political and economic arrangements that make the design and its implementation possible. It is usually expressed in the intentions of the designer and the physical potential/limitations of an urban set.

The second moment relates to the possibilities of appropriation of that designed space by the people who will occupy/use it. This part of the translation does not

necessarily depend on the design settings but can be influenced by it. Thus, directly addressing the question, the limits of design to be political depend on the combination of these two moments. Based on this idea of a territorial translation that escapes the power of the designer, and despite the fact that it counts for half of the equation, I also dare to say that design is never enough. The power of the political voice of a design will always be dependent on the relationship with its occupants/users and the way a territory is constituted – and therefore the ways in which spaces and places are used by the public. Design and its sociotechnical constituents can, thus, limit or encourage forms of appropriation and, consequently, its own political voice.

For instance, the institutional and regulatory components of a design are important parts to be considered in the way a territory defines its boundaries and possibilities for use and appropriation. The current wave of privately-manned public spaces in cities like London (and Rio de Janeiro) serves as an example, when the possibilities of occupation and usage are not only defined by the physical constitution of places but also, and very strongly, by the practices and technologies that govern and regulate what kinds of behaviours are allowed and where. We must recognize and understand these processes, and think through ways of counteracting, with the help of design, this movement of weakened urban commons.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958)

Two vignettes:

- Recently I had the great privilege of advising a young woman standing in the election for London Assembly, the candidate of a new formation called Take Back The City (TBTC).¹

Now TBTC, collectively, can't quite figure out if it wants to be a political party, a social movement, or a little bit of both. It's nevertheless clear that they wish to present themselves very much in the mould of Occupy, los Indignados, Syriza, and the other assemblages that have brought people into the streets, across the whole European movement of the squares. And so I spent most of my time with the candidate discussing the idea of "the commons," and the principles of horizontality, solidarity and mutual aid that did so much to animate and sustain those movements, all of which were more or less new to her.

What concerns me is
the disconnect between
ways in which we tend to
frame contemporary urban
challenges.

If I may say so, she remains less convincing speaking to these subjects than she is when she takes up other issues. I want to emphasize that this is no reflection whatsoever on her intellectual agility, or her commitment to change. It's that up until this very moment, these notions *simply hadn't been part of her vocabulary*. So when she speaks to them, it feels a little rote. It doesn't come from a place of profound conviction, it falls on the ears of an audience who for the most part also have other ways of framing the issues they face in everyday life, and so it doesn't resonate in quite the same way as the other things she says.

- As it happens, I also co-teach an M. Arch cluster at the Bartlett, in the Urban Design program. Our cluster is called Architectures of Participation, and it is entirely dedicated to the same set of questions we're taking up here.

Our students work in London communities like Peckham and Newham. These are places where the acute phase of gentrification is transforming a physical, social and cultural environment, and (in the case of Newham, at least) where political representation has broken down completely. Their brief is to develop means and infrastructures of active community participation. If you saw the Designing the Urban Commons show, you would likely find that their responses are familiar to you: by and large, they responded to their brief by proposing the very same kind of physical platforms, communication campaigns, and technical and social networks.

Despite our students' best and most diligent efforts, I'm afraid very little of this material resonates with the people they so sincerely intend to serve. Some of this, no doubt, is simple "consultation fatigue." Some of it is down to a broader sense that nothing will make any difference. Some of it is *surely* because my students are almost all privileged native Mandarin speakers, working in relatively deprived immigrant communities. But some of it is the result of what I almost think of as an impedance mismatch. What my students frame as a crisis of public space, public representation and the commons simply is not understood that way by the people most in harm's way.

What concerns me, then, is the disconnect between ways in which we tend to frame contemporary urban challenges, as academics, activists and self-appointed public intellectuals, and the way those same issues are understood by the broader population (especially in cultures without a strong tradition of bottom-up activism, or where that tradition has successfully had its back broken). I suppose this is not an issue, if one holds to Leninist principles of putatively advanced currents of thought and a vanguard party. I'm afraid, though, that as a horizontalist myself, it very much is an issue — vanguardism being neither ethically acceptable to me, nor by my lights likely to be effective.

The current processes of financialisation and privatisation of spaces, in particular urban spaces, are being denounced by many researchers and experts. In tense spatial contexts, in the case of metropolitan areas for example, every piece of land must be associated with a precise use, function, status, and owner. Despite the repeated announcements of urban planners and public authorities, zoning is still a common practice. By consequence, there is no more 'free' space for experimentation and "spontaneous expression". Even public spaces, which are shared, governed, bounded and controlled.

However, there is a dimension, extremely complex, which urban planners and public policies have to deal with: time. Urban design, and more precisely planning, tries to anticipate the evolutions of land uses and they are in crisis. Reality shows that both are faced with uncertainty. For instance, some real estate operations do not find buyers and economic activities can perish and/or disappear. Even the so called functionally mixed urban projects do not escape the risk of completely missing the population's expectations and needs.

Plateau Urbain was born from a simple finding: the surprising and large real estate vacancy in the service sector in the Ile-de-France region.

Here is where associations like *Plateau Urbain* enter into action.¹

Created in July 2013, *Plateau Urbain* was born from a simple finding: the surprising and large real estate vacancy in the service sector in the *Ile-de-France* region. At the same time, the number of entrepreneurs supporting

new associative, cultural or artistic projects keeps increasing and they still encounter huge difficulties to find affordable rentals and spaces.

Plateau Urbain proposes to be the interface between owners of empty spaces and project holders. By ensuring the tenants pay only taxes and charges, the association aims to support and promote creation in its largest sense and develops spaces for experimentation and re-appropriation.

By multiplying the uses of spaces, most importantly ephemeral ones, for example before a building demolition, the initiative allows neighbourhoods to gain long term attractiveness. It creates a totally new mix of activities and functions, foster new habits, manners and ways of living. The will of *Plateau Urbain* is to participate strongly in this movement.

Today with energy prices skyrocketing and resources becoming scarce, enterprises and public authorities are obliged to minimize their expenses. This is why *Plateau Urbain* develops recycling initiatives and industry partnerships in a virtuous circle of use and re-use of materials, and adaptation and rehabilitation of buildings.

For more than a year and a half, *Plateau Urbain* has been involved in *Les Grands Voisins* project in collaboration with the associations *Aurore* and *Yes We Camp*. This project shows the advantages of mixing and combining the uses of land in order to build commons and social tissues, and create the city of the future.

¹ <http://www.plateau-urbain.com/>

Andrew Belfield

Reflecting on our position in a contested development site in Deptford, design is inherently political, with new buildings, spaces, infrastructures emerging and affecting the communities they are forced upon.

However the decisions that have manifested themselves spatially are not made by designers or citizens but by legislators, policy makers and the flow of global capital in London. These decisions are not made on sites or neighbourhoods but at the desks of city municipalities and global corporations.

Decisions are not made by
designers or citizens but by
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in London.

My experience in Deptford has been that of an architect (designer), facilitator, activist and now 'planner' as the community develops a Neighbourhood Plan. It is through the legislation of the 2011 Localism Act that a community of local citizens now wants to reclaim some of the power that affects the decision making on the future of Deptford.

This shift from resistance to planning has arrived following the failure of campaigns and the marginalisation of a community's voice over the development of their neighbourhood. My personal role has been to articulate an alternative development plan on behalf of local stakeholders. However this proposal has fallen on deaf ears, as adopting changes this late in the process would be prohibitively expensive for the developer and a headache for a Labour council determined to build. Essentially the resistance came

too late, as key planning and policy decisions were made in 2007 - before any spatial configurations had been proposed. This incoherent process is consistent with nearly all major development, regeneration or gentrifying schemes across London.

A community's hopes of power and influence now lies in the hands of the Localism Act, an austerity driven ideology utilising voluntary labour to provide a public service. Despite this there is radical potential waiting to be unlocked; allowing communities the right to build, manage and plan within a defined territory. This is a process where the odds of success are stacked against communities (intentionally so), as voluntary organisations always struggle with work capacity and fatigue, as well as a distinct lack of planning expertise within these neighbourhood forums. Despite this, I am still overwhelmingly optimistic about finding the voice of local communities in key decision-making and the development of a new paradigm in community-driven planning.

The latest involvement of *public works* is Trade Deptford; a collaborative art project with Deptford Neighbourhood Action (Forum) and Assembly (artist collective). Though the creation of a physical forum and the hosting of public events in this arena, we are beginning to build evidence for new community-driven legislation. Whilst no projects are completely democratic or participatory our project offers a chance for local opinion to become political. Our concern now is to turn this voice into legislation - and to allow the design of our built environment to be political in the future to come.

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