

Urban Backstages

Buenos Aires 2019

Biennales and Festivals Grant Report

Theatrum Mundi (TM) helps to expand the crafts of city-making through collaboration between artists and urbanists. Initially founded by Richard Sennett at LSE Cities, TM is now an independent research centre operating as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, with the aim of improving the understanding of cities through education and research.

We think that collaboration with artists can offer city-makers — architects, planners, engineers, and urbanists — new ways of thinking about and designing the public and cultural lives of cities. We convene practitioners and scholars in workshops and seminars, we conduct and publish research through print, exhibitions and film, and we facilitate creative projects and fellowships allowing artists to work with issues in urbanism.

## Background

After presenting research at the Edinburgh International Culture Summit in 2018, Theatrum Mundi was invited by Enrique Avogadro, Culture Minister of el Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (GCBA) to conduct research in Buenos Aires as part of our Urban Backstages project.

In April 2019, in partnership with GCBA's Cultural Data Team, Theatrum Mundi undertook a week of fieldwork, visiting sites of cultural production in the city of Buenos Aires. We documented the design existing infrastructures in the city and the users experiences of working in these spaces.

We held a workshop in collaboration with the city data team and research group, Antropologia Urbana, which provoked a discussion about the methods and critical frameworks for understanding the conditions shaping the city's capacity to support cultural production.

Following this research trip, GCBA invited Theatrum Mundi back to Buenos Aires to implement our research outcomes in the form of an exhibition and knowledge exchange. With support from the British Council ADF department, through the funding opportunity for International Biennials and Festivals, we were able to participate in the 17th Buenos Aires Architecture Biennial, producing a display, mini-publication, and design workshop with architects from GCBA's Culture department.

We would like to thank the British Council team, especially Elena Tamosiunaite and Joao Guarantani, the team at GCBA including Hernan Seiguer and Yasmina Ghio, who were key in making this happen.



Left:  
*Urban Backstages  
 XVII Bienal  
 Internacional de  
 Arquitectura de  
 Buenos Aires essay.*

Below:  
*Urban Backstages  
 Exhibition, part of  
 Bienal Internacional  
 de Arquitectura de  
 Buenos Aires. Usina  
 del Arte.*

# Urban Backstages XVII Bienal de Arquitectura de Buenos Aires

Exhibition: Urban Backstages  
 Dates: 15–20 October 2019  
 Location: Usina del Arte, Buenos Aires  
 Supported by: The British Council

We understand the backstage to be the settings in which cultural forms are written, made, and rehearsed before they meet the public eye. Literally the backstage of a theatre, but also workshops, studios, kitchens, and rehearsal rooms that are often hidden from view but are essential to sustaining the cultural life of the city.

As part of the Biennial, we exhibited a large-format display of drawings and texts documenting four ‘backstage’ cultural spaces in Buenos Aires, alongside a film from our case studies in London. The drawings highlight the tools, objects, and spatial conditions that characterise the different forms these backstages can take, across two theatres and two visual arts workspaces in the neighbourhoods of Abasto and La Boca, both of which are key sites for cultural strategies in Buenos Aires.

The drawings were accompanied by an extended essay analysing these conditions and the different models of provision they represent, from institutional to entrepreneurial to community. This was published in a pamphlet designed by Uruguay-based designer Marcos Villalba, and produced with the support of the British Council. The pamphlet was distributed to a broad public at the Biennial as well as through our workshop, at a local library, and directly to members of Theatrum

Mundi’s network in the UK and France. Roughly 250 copies of this research publication have been disseminated internationally.

As part of the biennial, John Bingham-Hall was invited to join a panel exploring The construction of cities through a cultural perspective alongside artist Leandro Erlich, and architect Alvaro Garcia Resta, moderated by Enrique Avogadro, Minister of Culture of Buenos Aires.

TM Director John Bingham-Hall was also interviewed by the Argentinian media, and both the panel and exhibition were featured in major local newspapers **La Nación** and **Clarín**. John Bingham-Hall is quoted as saying: “We are interested in where the production takes place, where the artists work, rehearse and write. Artistic practice is by nature experimental, it tests scenarios, and these scenarios produce new forms of urban and architectural space. If governments and urban planners can create infrastructure to provide enough support, practitioners can build new forms of activity that they could not have imagined beforehand.”

After visiting our exhibition, the architectural platform ArchDaily Plataforma Arquitectura, based in Buenos Aires, also reached out to collaborate in the dissemination of Urban Backstages through publishing a piece of writing about the project which will be released next year.







# Urban Backstages Design Workshop

Date: 16–17 October, 2019  
Location: Parque de la Estación,  
Buenos Aires

## Participants

Theatrum Mundi team: Andrea Cetrulo,  
Cecily Chua, John-Bingham-Hall.

GCBA team: Brenda Falcon, Emanuel  
Mora, Emiliano Cruz Michelena,  
Jeronimo Bedel, Melina Berman, Hernan  
Macedo, Teresa Dodero, Hernan  
Seiguer, Yasmina Ghio

Antropología Urbana: Alejandro Yomal,  
Anibal del Olmo;

Professor of Architecture at Universidad  
de Buenos Aires: Gonzalo Etchegorry

Architecture degree students at  
Universidad de Buenos Aires: Jennifer  
Arias, Lucia Britti, Eric Sosa, Santiago  
Torres, Camilla Korecki;

Invited speakers:  
Panal 361 founder, Silvana Ovsejevich,  
Panal 361 Communications Manager,  
Julieta Goldin.

## Main aims

A two-day workshop that explored the potential of underused corner plots in the Abasto neighbourhood of Buenos Aires for cultural production, as part of a city government led project to include these sites in a strategy for increasing the cultural visibility of the neighbourhood. The challenge we proposed was to think beyond strategies using visibility to target tourists, and develop ideas for the ways they could operate as part of Abasto's "backstage." The workshop aimed to increase access for Abasto's residents to informal opportunities for cultural production. The proposals will be used as part of our wider research project, and presented back to the Government of the City of Buenos Aires.





*Above: Urban Backstages walk of Abasto led by architect Emiliano Cruz Michelena.*



*Right: Urban Backstages design workshop discussion at Parque de la Estacion.*

## Debrief

Young architects from a local university collaborated with Theatrum Mundi, GCBA's culture team and researchers from Antropologia Urbana to imagine new ways in which cultural infrastructure could be implemented in the Abasto neighbourhood. To start the workshop, Theatrum Mundi presented our research project Urban Backstages followed by a group discussion on the meaning of cultural infrastructure. Architect and curator Silvana Ovsejevich then presented Panal 361, a multidisciplinary space for artists, designers and makers and an example of the neighbourhood's existing cultural infrastructure. Emiliano Cruz Michelena, head of the architectural department at GCBA, led a walk through Abasto exploring the typology of underused corner sites for creative production. The group then split up into small teams to produce sketches, models, plans, strategy diagrams and policy recommendations producing a range of exciting ideas of how to reanimate these spaces for creative purposes.

The proposals raised explored alternatives to organizational and management structures that govern spaces for cultural production, and the relation of the neighbourhood with the rest of the city. The sketches and discussions that emerged from the workshop showed a broad range of ways to do this, including convertible platforms that can transform from stages to closed rehearsal spaces, corner gallery spaces subsidising workshops in their hinterlands, and a network of interconnected scaffolds supporting subsidiary functions of storage and communication that take place in the backstage of theatres.

This also opened up new paths for collaborating with local actors such as Silvana Ovsejevich, who is now writing a reflection on the workshop in relation to her own experience of running an independent cultural space in Abasto.



## Workshop Feedback

“I thought it was very interesting that you proposed a perspective on the management of spaces that precedes the physical design of space. Overall, you brought excellent examples of cultural production that pushed me to think of it from different perspectives.”

“The concept of the city as theatre, and the backstage of the theatre as a parallel of the urban backstage, helped me reflect on our lives in the city. Certain concepts stuck to me such as: ‘looking through the eyes of artists’ or ‘how cultural life is staged in the city’.”

“The workshop was very enriching as it brought together people from different disciplines, and this is something that should be common practice, especially when it comes to designing projects for the city.”

“Thinking about the connection between management/programmatic structures and their physical layout is the main thing I take away with me from this workshop.”

“It is very important to receive an external view, culturally and disciplinarily speaking. We take a very enriching contribution, which will help me deepen the initial project stages in which we are right now.”



*Above: Urban Backstages design workshop proposal presentations at Parque de la Estacion.*

*Left: Abasto corner propositional model, Gonzalo Etcheberry.*





## Project outcomes and future work

The support of the British Council enabled us to return to Buenos Aires to implement outcomes of our research, with impact both within and beyond the Biennial, and in ways that are creating links between our collaborators in the UK and Argentina.

The display produced for the Biennial was just one element of our public engagement. Along with the audiences that came to the event, we were able to reach wider publics by disseminating our pamphlet and via national media. The work was also featured in architecture magazine, **ArchDaily**, distributed in Mexico, Colombia, Chile and Argentina.

The workshop co-organised with GCBA enabled us to use our publication as a starting point to influence the work of architects and city planners by seeing the city from the point of view of the artist. As the feedback from our workshop shows, this challenged GCBA's architects and planners to think further beyond place branding in their strategy for Abasto. The charette provoked a discussion about the need to build networks of support, whether visibility or invisibility from the public was an important factor, how to instigate alternative funding ideas, and what the potential was for the design and adaptability of existing physical infrastructures.

Silvana Ovsejevich is also as a result in contact with Rob Morrison of Agile City, a platform in Glasgow that manages cultural spaces and with whom Theatrum Mundi is running a research exchange between cultural infrastructure practitioners in Glasgow and Marseille (supported by the British Council / British Embassy in France via a separate call). Civic House, one of Agile City's spaces, may be able to join the international residency exchange programme run by Panal 361. Hernan Seiguer of Ministerio de Cultura GCBA expressed interest in sharing knowledge with other participants in our study, for example in the international design meeting planned for the final year of the project (2021).

Urban Backstages Buenos Aires shows a model for expanding our research, whose core cities are London, Glasgow, Paris and Marseille, to cities beyond the UK and Europe. By doing so, we are able to both learn from their approaches, open up discussions that help broaden them, and create the basis for a knowledge exchange between both policy-level and grassroots level actors. Working with the British Council adds enormous value to this work and we hope to have the opportunity to collaborate to continue the essential research and network development we have already begun.



Theatrum Mundi is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, with the charitable aim of improving the understanding of cities through education and research. We think that collaboration with artists can offer city-makers — architects, planners, engineers, and urbanists — critical approaches to the way their crafts shape the public life of cities.

Our concern is for the ways the public lives of cities, in all their forms, are understood and designed. We aim to enrich these by engaging urbanists in co-production of knowledge, culture, and design, with artists, writers, performers, and scholars.

We convene practitioners and scholars in workshops, seminars, public events, and creative projects. We also publish independently and through other platforms. Established now as a charity based in London, our projects and programmes operate internationally with a wide range of partners.

Theatrum Mundi was founded at LSE Cities in 2012, as a series of conversations led by LSE Professor of Sociology Richard Sennett and Dr Adam Kaasa. It was established as a research project at LSE Cities through seed funding from Nesta, and at the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University through a grant from the Mellon Foundation. After 5 years of incubation and through the kind support of colleagues at both NYU and LSE, it became an independent charity in 2017.

#### Credits

Text: Andrea Cetrulo, John Bingham-Hall, Cecily Chua  
Design: Cecily Chua

#### Support from:

Ax:son Johnson Foundation, British Council,  
Gobierno de la Ciudad De Buenos Aires.



*Urban Backstages* is an ongoing research project led by Theatrum Mundi in partnership with the Ax:son Johnson Foundation, with fieldwork and speculative design taking place in London, Glasgow, Paris, Marseille, and Buenos Aires.