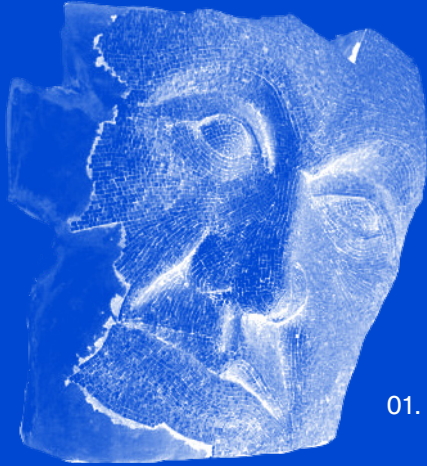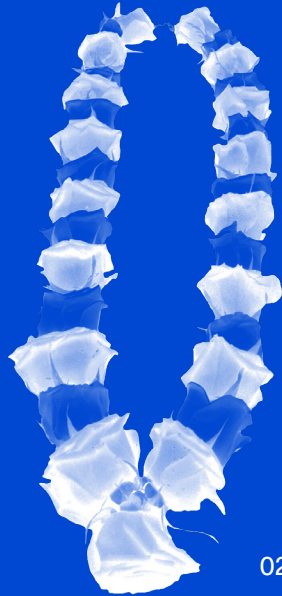# Urban Backstages Sprint

01.

02.

03.

MA CITIES

THEATRUM MUNDI

Theatrum Mundi's *Urban Backstages* looks at the hidden forms of production that underpin the cultural life of the city.

We set out to challenge the narrow definitions of culture in planning, identifying the inherent inequalities in investment for culture. Cultural regeneration strategies often default to funding landmark cultural institutions, public sites where culture is consumed and displayed, often overlooking backstage spaces such as workshops, rehearsal rooms and industrial spaces where cultural is produced.

The project aims to develop a broad account of the what constitutes the urban 'backstage' to include writing, rehearsing, and making, alongside light industry and artisanship, seeking to understand the hidden networks and infrastructural conditions that allow these practices to flourish.

This workshop was a collaboration between Theatrum Mundi and Central Saint Martin's MA Cities, a masters course exploring alternative, creative approaches to city-making.

Participants were asked bring an examples of the *Urban Backstage* from their own towns and cities. The workshop initiated a broader critical discussion exploring the hidden systems of finance, governance, and social networks that enable these spaces to exist and analysing their underlying material and ecological conditions.

This zine is compiles the participant's initial responses to a series of prompts, and culminates in a discussion reflecting on how our cities can better maintain, support and activate sites of cultural production.

Case Studies

Civic Square (Birmingham)

Data Darbar Sufi shrine (Lahore)

Escola de Samba Estácio de Sá
(Rio de Janeiro)

The Farm of Futures (Tolworth,London)

Grow Studios and Hackney Wick & Fish
Island CDT (Hackney, London)

Lakeside Centre (Thamesmead, London)

Radio Alhara (Bethlehem, Ramallah and
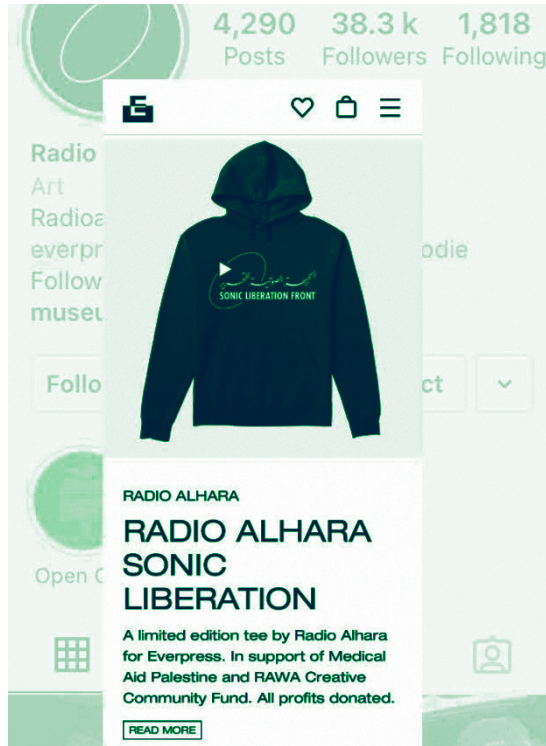Amman)

Troy Town Art Pottery (London)

Finance

How much each producer shall pay, for how much space and to whom?

What kind of contracts (long-term, short-term, fixed, flexible) are offered in this space?

Is there any production in this space that receives any subsidies?

If yes, what types public funding can it access?

Radio Alhara الهَوَاء الطلق

We have assumed that producers neither pay for the space nor earn anything from it. The production is voluntary, and uses existing studios and infrastructure. No payment for labor - finances must come from other professions

For guest producers, we incredibly short term (a set at a time) contracts, but it is unclear if there is any contractual agreement between radio stations or the network of producers. The solidarity network and support of a cause is clear, and this economy of exchange and support is part of the Radio Alhara brand.

Assumption: Production receives no funding or subsidies - supported by in-kind radio network mirroring as well as high-profile platforming (e.g. Venice Biennale). Currently at 38.3K followers on IG but unlikely to find sponsorship due to Palestinian cause. Internet radio difficult to monetise in general. Currently fundraising on their IG for Medical Aid Palestine.

Lakeside Centre

Sources of funding

- Arts Council
- Peabody (housing/association developer)
- Gre - Central Government
- Own revenue streams

Grow Studios

Grow studios provides a series of studio spaces for artists and creatives as well as co-working. Types of production include:

- Visual and street art
- Photography
- Film making
- Architecture and design
- Clothing design & making
- Furniture design & making
- Set design & making
- Music

There are several different space which can be rented (at different cost) and which support different types of collaborations:

- Desk Space from £180 p/m
- Artist's Booths from £270 p/m
- Studio space (variable sizes) rent n/a
- Rooftop (Approx 18m x 39m or 7000 sq ft)
- Rates begin at £300 for half a day

Data Darbar Sufi shrine

The Grow Studio has a formal, carefully drafted finance structure whereas the Data Darbar functions without a financial model.

It is interesting to note that the institutions and the individual donors financing the shrine have no say in the cultural production or activities of the shrine, which are solely produced by the visitors

Civic Square
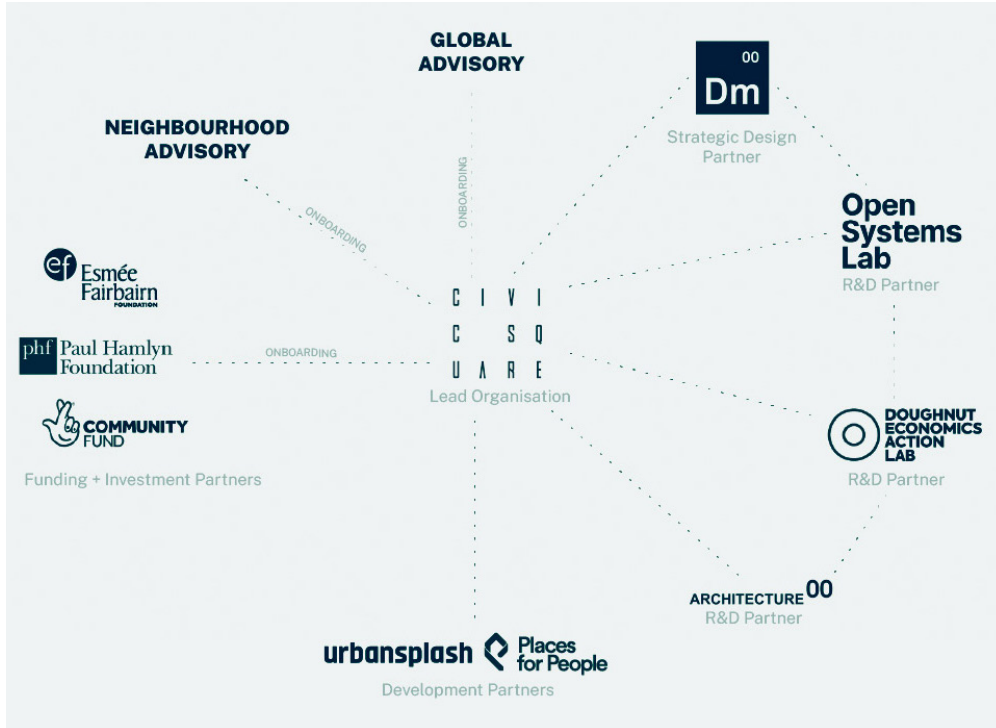
List of funders taken from
Civic Square's website.

Escola de Samba Estácio de Sá

| Escola de Samba Estacio de Sa. | 1300m2 (22m x 60m) |
| central rio de janeiro | Estimated rent- looking at similar spaces - 50.000 $R/ month |

Space

Which cultural projects are located within the immediate neighborhood? Do they have any relationship to the building?

What types of productive activities happen in the space?

What types of space are on offer?

Has the space been purpose-built or re-adapted for use? What kind of adaptations have been made in the space?

Are you aware of any specific policy, legal act, or (informal) rule associated with the space?

Are there any (in)formal rules that affect the use or management of the space?

How does it feel to work in such a space?

Radio Alhara راديو الحارة

Radio Alhara broadcast from a range of existing spaces, and drawing on existing infrastructure (decks,, homes, wifi. By capitalizing on the internet to produce radio, Radio Al Hara uses the global internet infrastructure to reach its audience. By also using the internet to broadcast, it frees itself from needing the physical location of a radio station - and antenna - and is able to set up shop in a variety of locations if need be as long as the space provides security for the equipment and decent soundproofing.
The space of the backstage production is pre-existing, or is put together on the spot, out of kit, for a show.

The production of the show is both about the space around the space of production, and detached from it. We assume the production leaves no trace in the urban environment, while advocating for the wider urban, material, human and national reality of Palestine to leave a stronger international trace.

It Could be any villa, flat or rooftop broadcast to the Venice Biennale, and any cultural producer in the world broadcasting back into Palestine on a guest slot with Radio Alhara. A map of all these spaces, connected to a cause and to each other, and leaving no trace of this production on their immediate environments, would be beautiful.

Lakeside Centre

Re-purposed derelict building:

- Redesigned to create studio spaces and multipurpose spaces, including public cafe, child care facilities.

- Improved perimeter security & space branding, restricted access to building and surroundings grounds.

- Improved lighting, internal architecture (large lifts, better flooring, insulation.

- Safety for waterbirds.

The Farm of Futures

- Farm of Futures is on a plot of land which is divided into plots with a shed at the start of site.

- The shed has been refurbished into a workshop office space currently for 121 Collective.

- Often nearby community members get involved in the space.

- There's an aquaponics, chicken shed, bee coop.

Grow Studios

There are different types of Cultural Infrastructure which are supported in the spaces of Grow Studios in Hackney.

Infrastructure of Making:

- Clothing design & making
- Furniture design & making
- Set design & making

Infrastructure of Performance:

- Choreography
- Music production

Infrastructure of the Virtual:

- Photography
- Film making
- Architecture and design

Data Darbar Sufi shrine

The space is used mostly for performance based cultural production - in the form of everyday religious and spiritual rituals, including weekly performances of singing and dancing.

Civic Square

Civic Square will eventually be housed in An industrial building but for now occupies a Barge given to them by developers -Port Loop- The barge as a space represents the front room as a space where home/society can be re-imagined.

Civic Square is located near Yard by MAIA where 'imagination' as cultural production is also key- both are connected by Dark Matter Labs. There is a strong sense of potentiality on the development is still very much in process which almost maps potentiality and imagination into the current landscape.

Escola de Samba Estácio de Sá

The Escola is a multipurpose space, holding it's primary activity: Samba rehearsals for Carnival, but also theatre classes, music shows, Social assistance, Shop and Church events.

It's located in a vibrant area of the city centre of Rio, near Santa Teresa and the Cathedral.
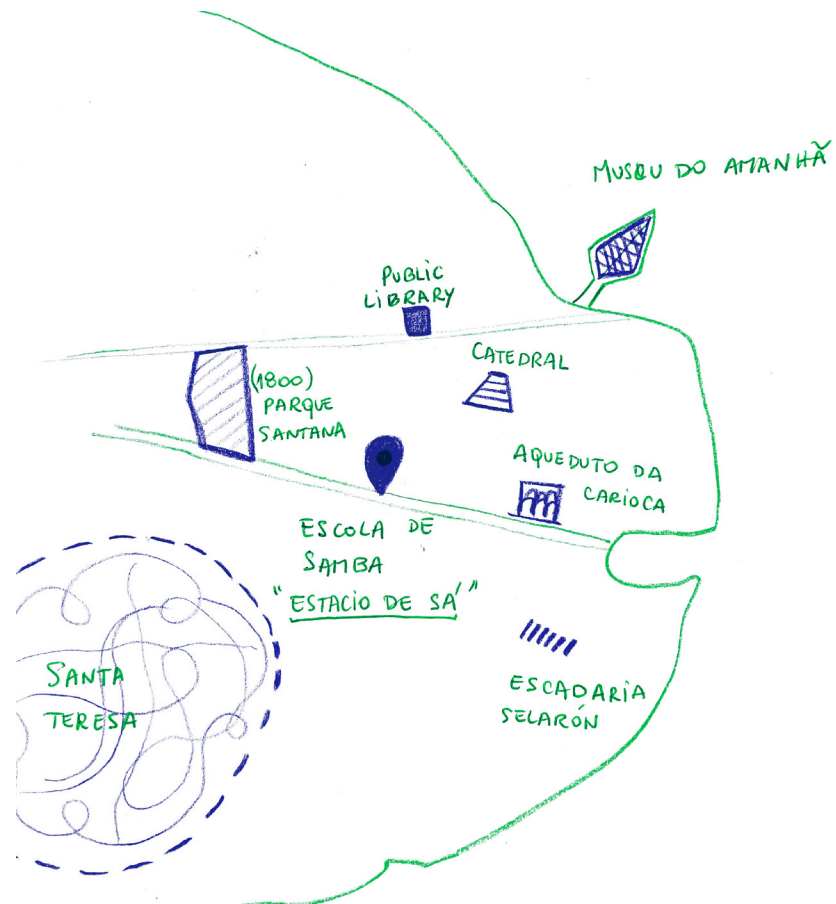
Networks

Are there any activities besides production taking place in the space?

Which services do the producers use and at which scale these services are involved in their operation?

Where, to whom, and how are the products of this space disseminated?

How is the space organised and managed?

Who occupies the space? Are the occupants of the space part of a larger organisation?

Radio Alhara عراديو الحارة

This poster, or post, shows the core network of founding members who, we assume, lead on the programming of shows by a much wider network of artists, musicians and cultural producers. Beyond individual contributors, a network of international independent radio stations were initially involved in mirroring Radio Alhara content, as they went viral and became the cultural spearhead of Spring 2021 Palestinian activism, and are now involved in making content platformed by Radio Alhara.
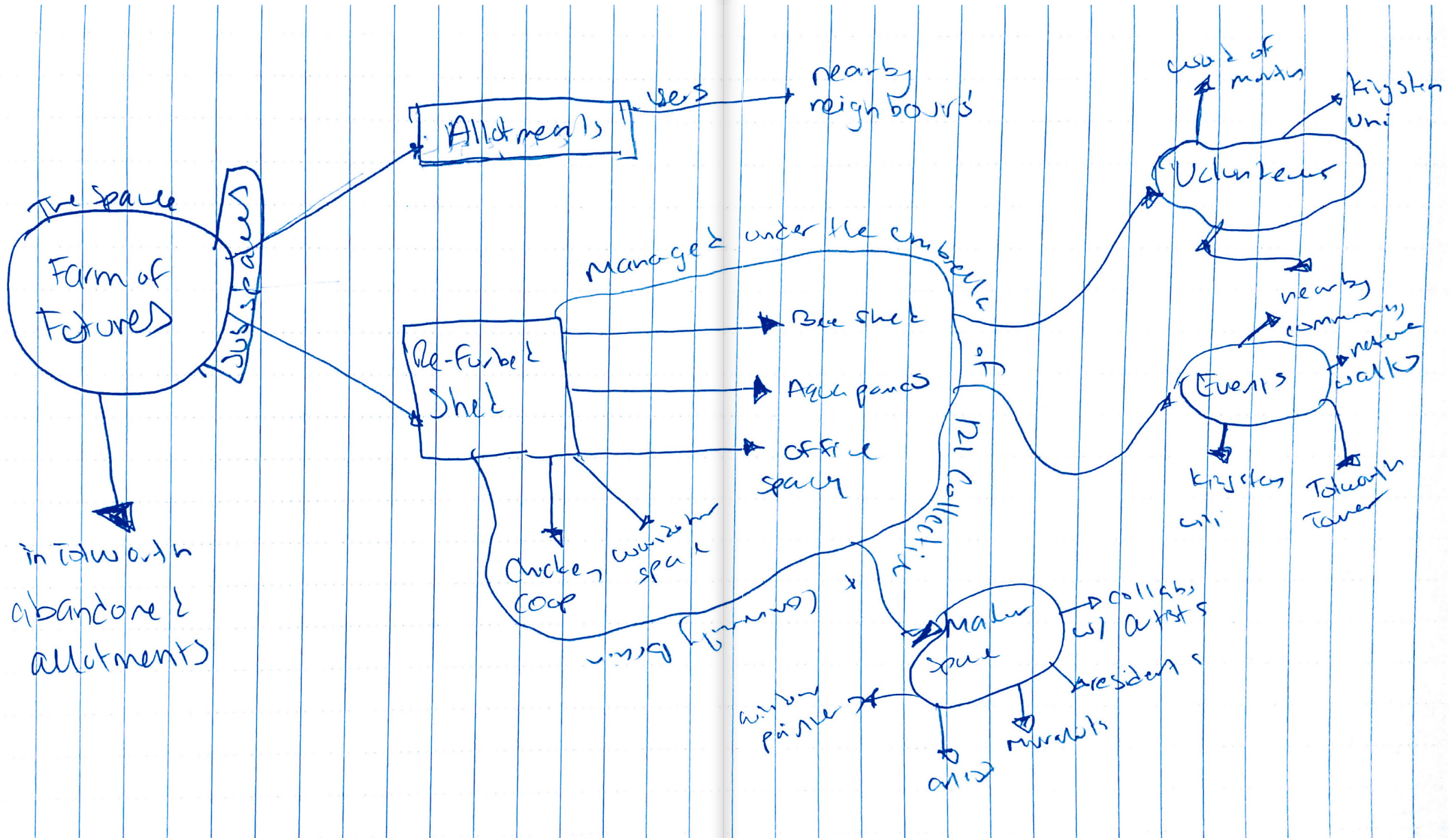
This international network is sustained by an labour exchange built into the actions of solidarity, platforming and mirroring: we assume it makes RA sustainable by distributing the voluntary labour it relies on across multiple organisations and individual practices, while benefiting each of these in turn.

Digital radio as a form of backstage production in Palestine responds to the condition of "infrastructures shaped by a lack of infrastructure" recognised by Theatrum Mundi in their study of cultural production in Marseilles, London and Glasgow. The lack of infrastructure in this case is manifest at multiple scales addressed by Radio Alhara. On a national scale, online broadcasting counters the physical infrastructural disconnection from other cultural production hubs: in the West Bank, driving anywhere could take as long as each checkpoint wants.

On an international scale, viral cultural production contributes to demystifying the 'Palestinian question' as too complicated to engage in -- a key idea countered by contemporary Palestinian cultural activism.

The Farm of Futures

The Space

Farm of Futures → in Tolworth abandoned allotments

Sustrans →

Allotments → Uses → nearby neighbours'

Re-Furbed Shed

Managed under the umbrella of PR Collective

Bee shed
Aqua ponds
Office space
Chicken Coop
communal space

growing (flowers)

window planter → artist → murals

Smaller space → Collabs w/ artists
residents

Volunteers → uses of matter → Kingston Uni

nearby community reserve walks

Events → nearby community
Kingston uni
Tolworth Tower

Grow Studios

Felicity Jones, sculptor and blacksmith which works within Grow Studios is taken as an example to look at different scale of operation.

Most of her work happens in her workshop (Block Dog Forge), within Grow Studios. She collaborates with other artists and makers located there as well as with photographers and video-makers for the media on her website.

She mainly works with re-used (upcycled) materials for most of her works. Hackney Wick is a source of these material thanks to its industrial past and all the construction works happening there in the last years.

Recycled and raw materials are also sourced around London which also represent a large potential market for all her pieces.

She collaborates with several UK artists (Mutoid Waste co.) and her work has been exhibited in Galleries and Festivals such as Glastonbury.

Globally, she had exhibitions in Italy, France, the Netherlands as well as at Burning Man festival in US.

Her work is an example of how local networks and local material practises can be connected to global flows of exchange
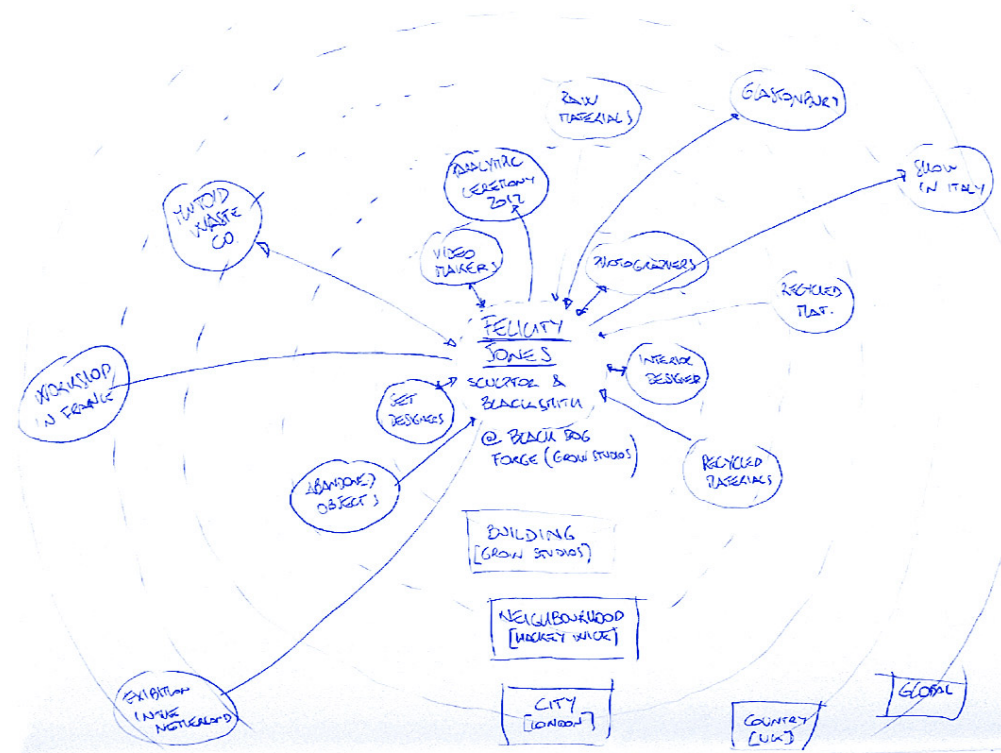

Data Darbar Sufi shrine
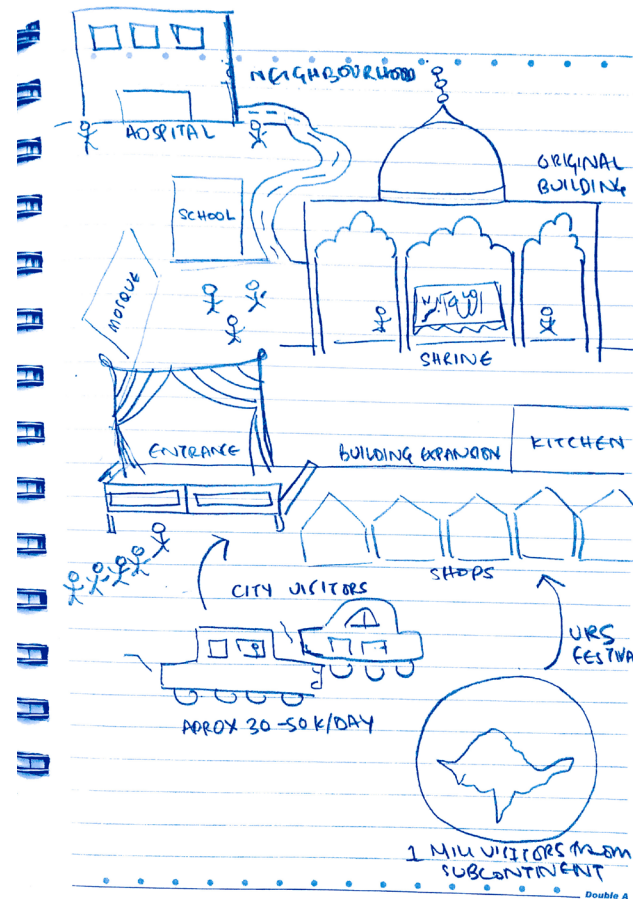
The Data Darbar has a complex network that ranges from the local scale to the global scale. The physical space has expanded overtime to accommodate the various people and activities that starting taking place at the shrine. What used to be a one-room burial site for the Saint has grown into a complex that includes a free kitchen, a school, a library, a mosque and an outdoor market space to accommodate 300 stalls.

The shrine also helps its neighbourhood schools and hospitals by providing extra funds that are not being used by the shrine itself. An approximate 30-50,000 visitors come to the shrine each day from all over the city. On the annual "urs" or death anniversary of the Saint, an approximate 1 million people from the entire subcontinent visit the shrine.

Civic Square

Trying to create a distinction between activities and producers within Civic Square was initially challenging as the more it was explore the more intrinsic and interconnected they became
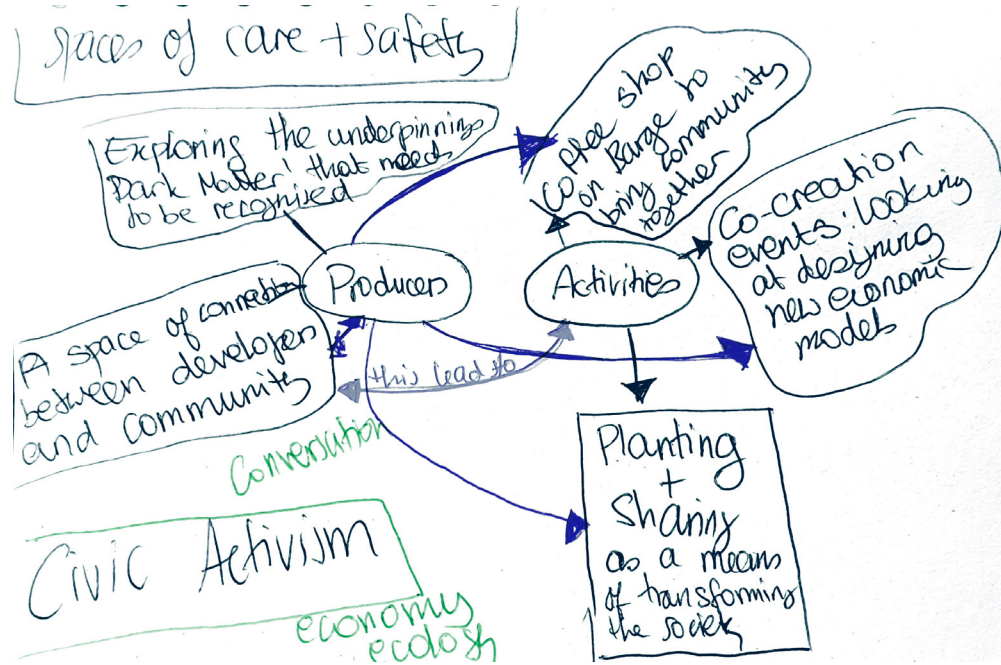
Escola de Samba Estácio de Sá
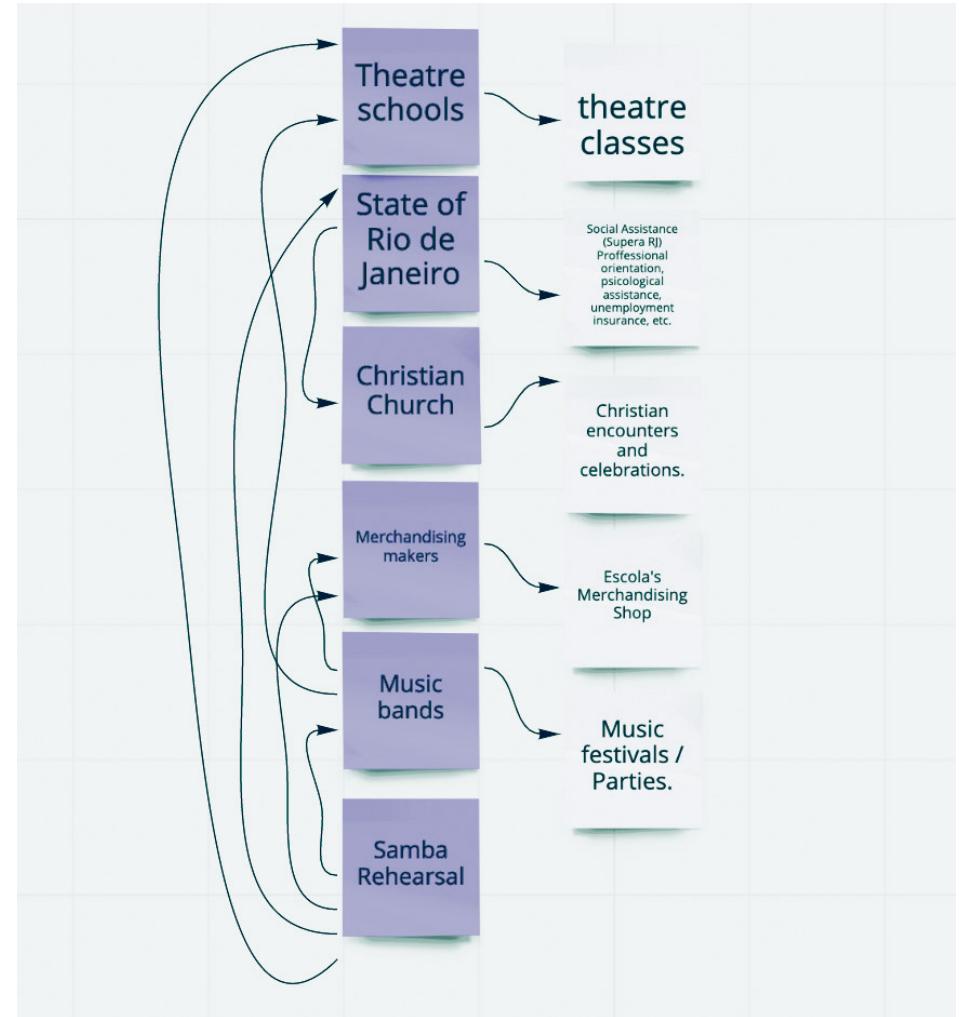
Labour / Time

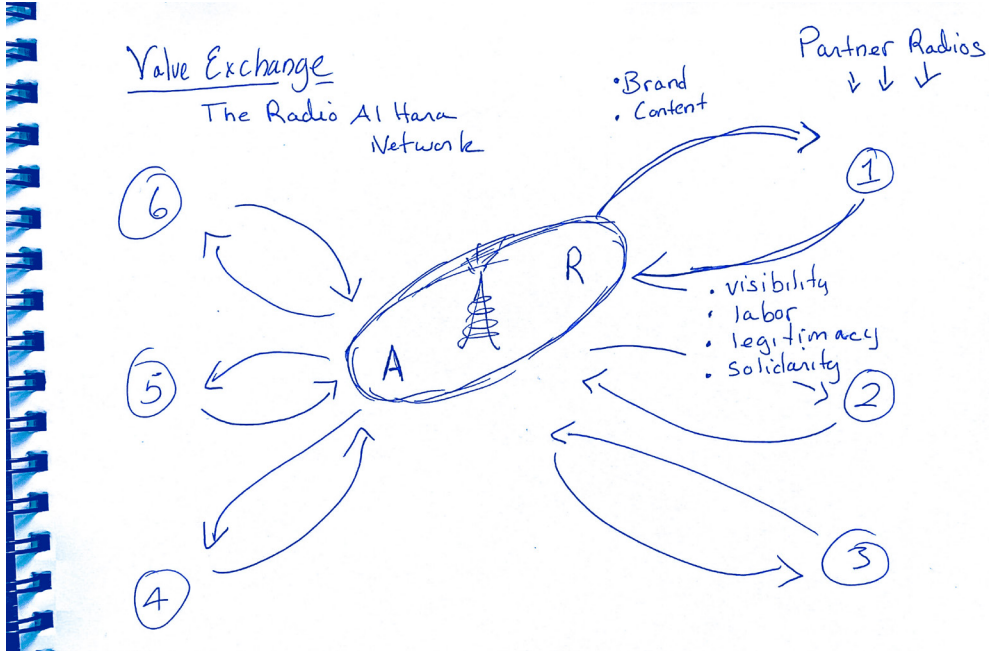What are the stages of a production process?

What materials and equipment are needed for that production?

How much time was spent to produce that product?

What hours can the producers access the space?

Is there any control on their access?

Radio Alhara راديو الحارة

The cultural production of Radio Al Hara is seemingly not monitised. Instead, a value exchange exists between Radio Al Hara and the network of partner radio stations in which the latter provides visibility, labor, legitimacy and solidarity in exchange for content and branding under the "cool" cause of Palestinian resistance.

Labour and time outlay includes curatorial and editorial decisions, networking with other radio stations and the production of individual sets as well as the PR/ communications content. All of this is smooth, regular and impactful, suggesting a dedicated team!

Access to the mode of production (backstage) is 24hrs a day, although these is an element of precarity: might the network be censored or shut down? Does the (we assume) voluntary nature of the work put its long-term sustainabilty at risk, or will the model adjust?

Image credit: Diagram by Louise Taylor

Lakeside Centre

- Resident Artist takes space.

- Utilises space to store, experiment, produce mosaics

- Utilises other facilities now available - cafe, studio, related artist workshops, networking with future collaborators

- Receives commissions from redeveloper, local council for local art installations

- Uses space as a platform for wider distribution of works (globally)

Grow Studios
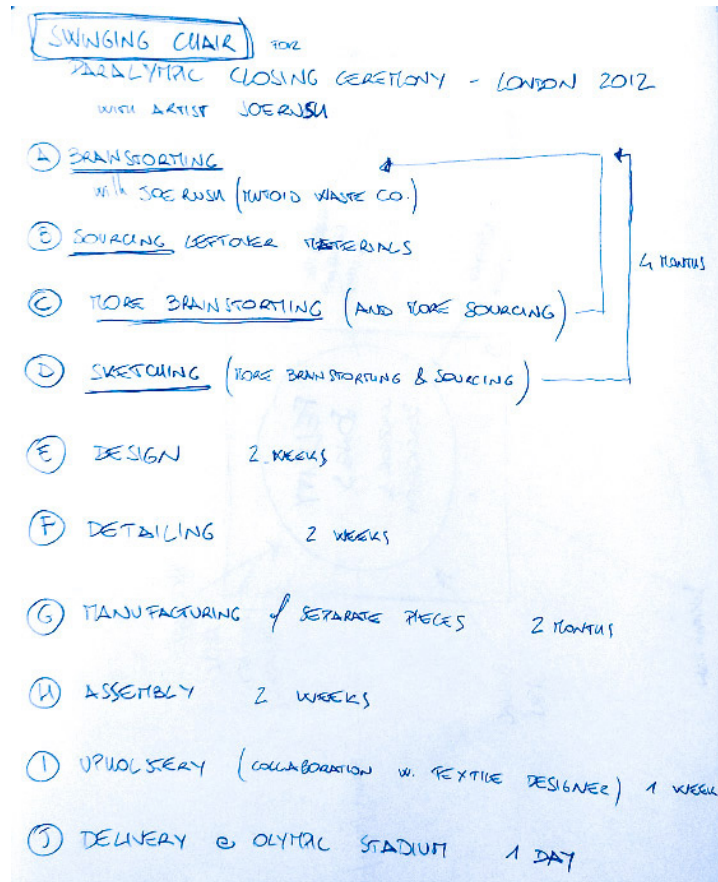
The diagram represents the production process and times of an artifact that Felicity Jones prepared for the Paralympic closing ceremony in 2012.

Olympics - the most global of the events - happening just round the corner from the sculptor studios and her work being showcase there is a representation of the interconnected local and global scales.
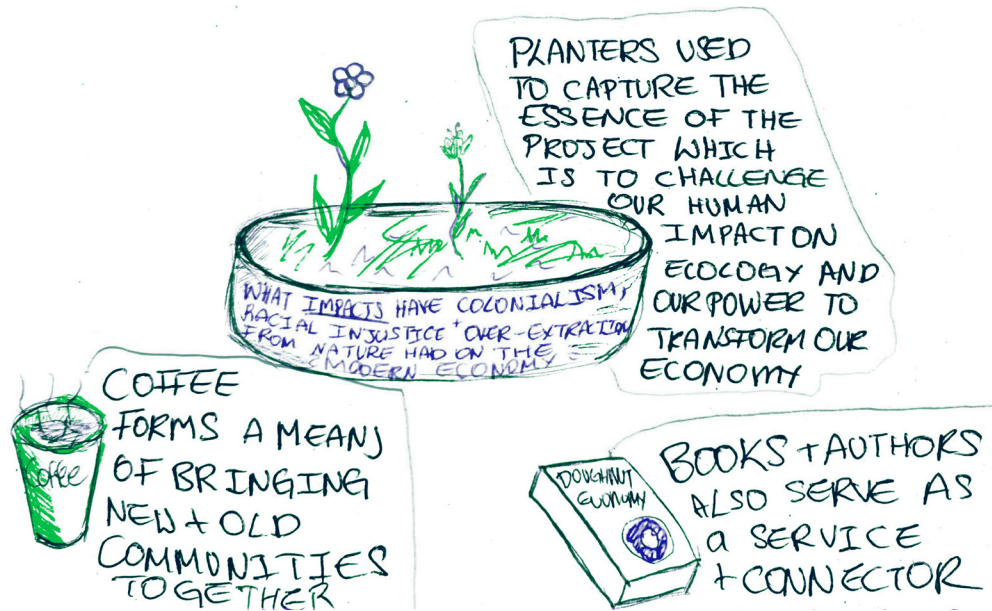
Data Darbar Sufi shrine

While there is no tangible production of goods, there is an intangible and sensorial production that takes place through out the day (and night) at the shrine.

There is a call to prayer, where the exact same acts of praying are performed at the exact same time, five times a day. Additionally, visitors come to pay respect to the Saint, which is also a specific performance - of putting flowers, touching the tomb etc.

Civic Square

PLANTERS USED TO CAPTURE THE ESSENCE OF THE PROJECT WHICH IS TO CHALLENGE OUR HUMAN IMPACT ON ECOLOGY AND OUR POWER TO TRANSFORM OUR ECONOMY

WHAT IMPACTS HAVE COLONIALISM, RACIAL INJUSTICE + OVER-EXTRACTION FROM NATURE HAD ON THE MODERN ECONOMY

COFFEE FORMS A MEANS OF BRINGING NEW + OLD COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

DOUGHNUT ECONOMY

BOOKS + AUTHORS ALSO SERVE AS A SERVICE + CONNECTOR

Looking at material objects that could represent something of the space made it a process of uncovering the essence of Civic Square - maybe - but then it became very general as many other projects would hold these objects as representations of themselves.

Escola de Samba Estácio de Sá
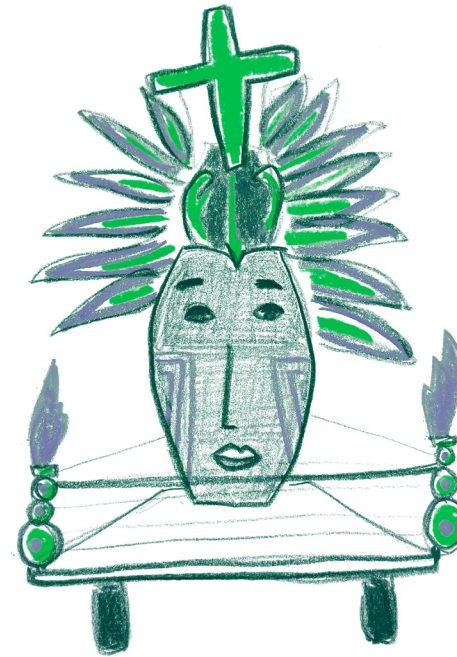
Unique object used for performance: Different producers involved.

Industrial object of massive production used for both production as well as performance.
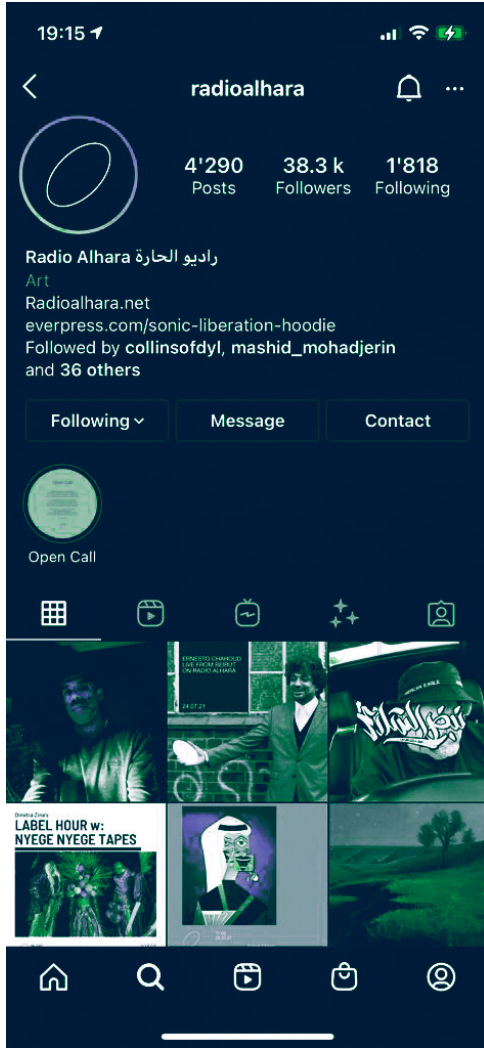
Labour / Time

What are the stages of a production process?

What materials and equipment are needed for that production?

How much time was spent to produce that product?

What hours can the producers access the space?

Is there any control on their access?

Radio Alhara راديو الحارة

Sets are announced on Instagram with one-liner captions in a joyful, appreciative tone and strong visual content from across the world. They are to the point, light, playful and pointedly transcultural.

Caption word sampling: sonic - party - solidarity - LIVE - super excited - curated - Bethlehem time - liberation.
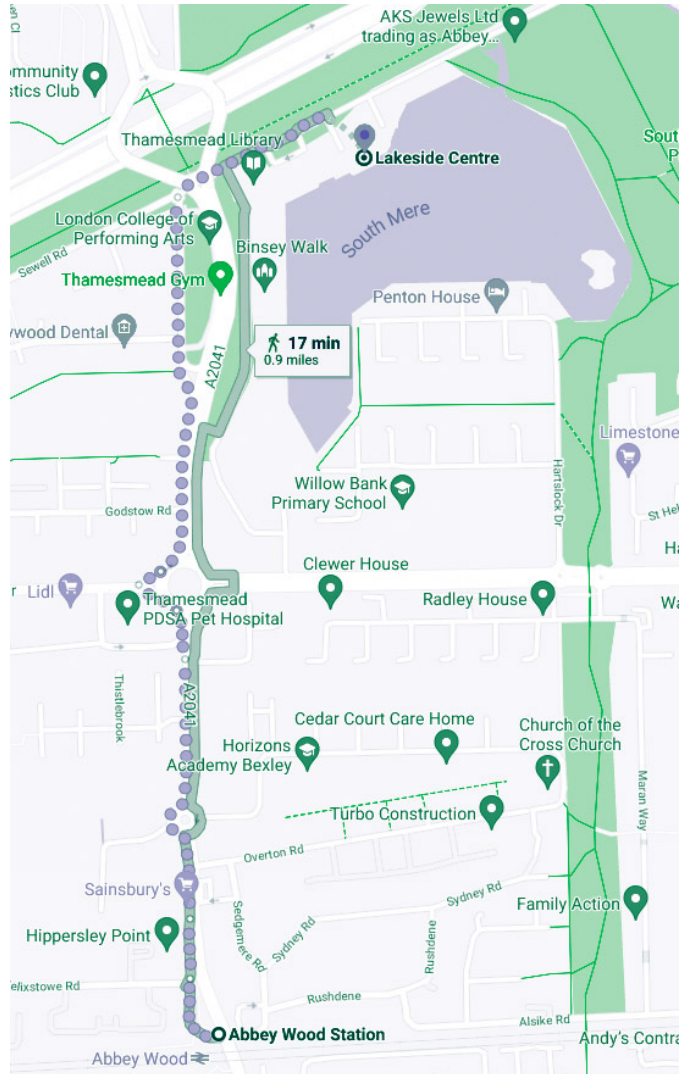
The Farm of Futures

Usually my travel there would be to arrive at Surbiton station and then take a bus. It can also be reached via Tolworth Station.

Once people are at the entrance of the allotment, there's a gate which needs to be pushed open.

A dirt track leads to the shed and further down the allotments and some houses are situated

Lakeside Centre

How to reach Lakeside Centre from Abbey Wood Station. Approx 17min walk.

Grow Studios

The main facade of Grow Studios and the ones of the surrounding buildings which are facing on Main Yard are characterized by massive graffiti which "announce" the presence of a creative space.

The back of the building is facing on the canal and hosts a bar/restaurant as well as informal green and seating areas.
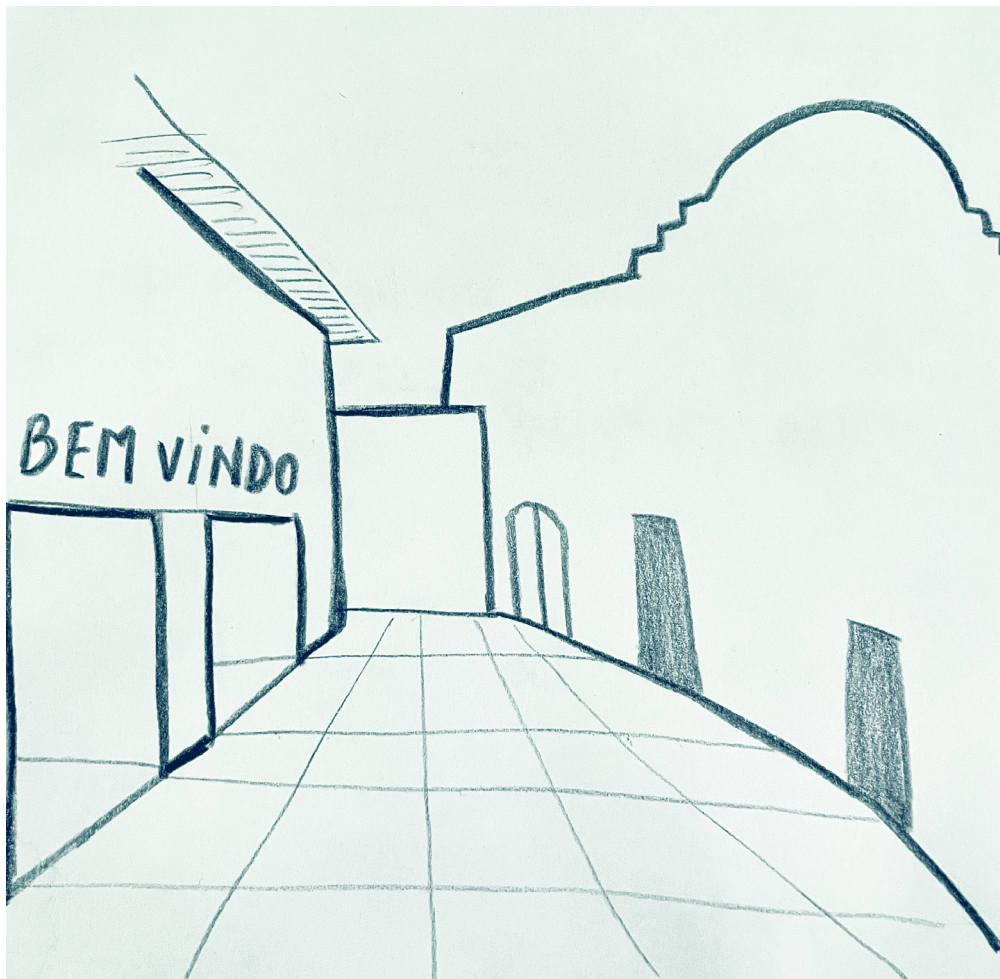
Data Darbar Sufi shrine

The Data Darbar Shrine communicates to the public through objects and elements more than the facade or the infrastructure itself (which is similar to that of a mosque). Objects such as a flower garland to put on the grave of the Saint buried at the Shrine, prayer beads, scarves inscribed with religious texts etc make the shrine easily identifiable.

Civic Square

The branding of the developer was interesting- either they are committed to the cause or they are incorporating it actively into their model- what does this mean for the future public interface of Civic Square?

PORT LOOP

DEVELOPER'S BRANDING INSIDE IS AN EMPTY SPACE THAT'STILL LIES IN THE STAGE OF POTENIAL
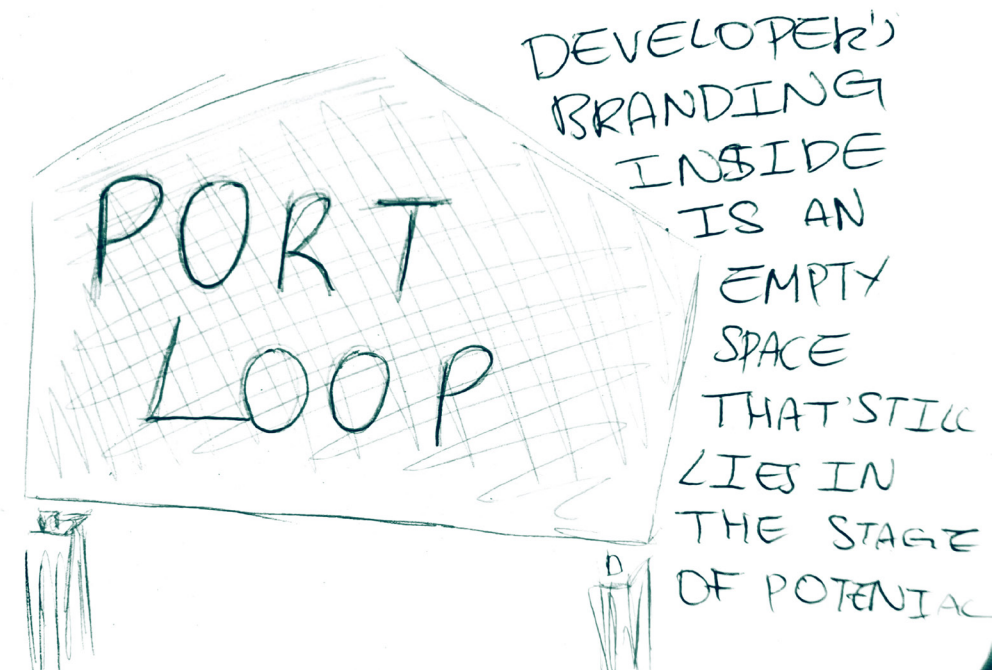
Escola de Samba Estácio de Sá

The facade is blind to the street, but in the inside there is a gallery and wide doors to access the pitch area. A kind of semi-private atrium is generated. Interesting public-semi-public - private instances.

Theatrum Mundi Reading List

Bingham-Hall, J. (2020) 'Infrastructures within Infrastructure: Culture production in London Railway Arches'. Faktur. no.3.

Cetrulo, A. Bingham-Hall, J. Karimnia, E. (2020) The Sensorial As Infrastructure. Lo Squaderno. no 56. pp. 25-29.

Karimnia, E. Kostourou, F. (forthcoming) 'Cultural Backstages as Creative Ecologies', Special issue of European Urban and Regional Studies.

Kostourou, F. Chua, C. Karimnia, E. (2020) Benign Neglect. MONU: Affordable Urbanism. no 32. pp. 62-69.

Urban Backstages Fieldwork Journal: London. TM Editions. https://theatrum-mundi.org/library/urbanbackstages-londonfieldwork/#book-reader/

Urban Backstages Fieldwork Journal: Glasgow. TM Editions. https://theatrum-mundi.org/library/urban-backstages-fieldwork-journal-2-glasgow/#book-reader/

Urban Backstages Fieldwork Journal: Marseille. TM Editions. https://theatrum-mundi.org/library/urban-backstages-fieldwork-journal-3-marseille/#book-reader/

Karimnia, E. Tribillon, J. Bingham-Hall, J. (2020) It's Always a Work in Progress. TM Editions. https://theatrum-mundi.org/shop/4643/

Discussion

- Cultural production shaping around imagination or re-imagining the city and its future.
- Although separated, there is convergence of infrastructural approach to support other productive activities.
- Definitions for cultural production really vary (different outcomes from a shrine and a digital platform).
- Methodologically, drawing, diagramming and mapping all these conditions is really hard and implies a very good understanding and processing of these information but also depends on your audience.
- Too prescriptive illustrations? Or leaving room for interpretation? How are illustrations are interpreted and translated?
- Strategic selection of the types of illustrations that can best represent the information.

- Relevancy of illustrations as visual prompts to convey information fast, succinctly efficiently.
- The differences between adapted versus purpose-built spaces for cultural production –the comparison between Radio Alhara and Lakeside Centre with the Shrine.
- The relationships of the case studies with other similar projects or the communities around them.
- Specific contexts attracts specific type of cultural production and other related uses like residential projects which may then affect negatively the cultural production itself. Culture becomes a catalyst for gentrification and displacement.

The workshop was designed and run by
Theatrum Mundi's researchers: Elahe
Karimnia, Fani Kostourou, and Cecily Chua.

Participants:

Andrea Bugli
Bisma Ahmad
Diana Ibáñez López
Guillermina Ratti
Khadija Carberry
Louise Taylor
Ritesh Mehra
Sadia Rahman

MA CITIES
THEATRUM MUNDI