

From 'Live' Projects to 'Lived' Environments: 'Practised' Architecture and Design Scales in the Contested Territories of the Global South

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Beyond the 'Live Build': Situated Learning and Situating Knowledge

Over 20 years ago, Lave & Wenger developed the idea of 'situated learning' based on the idea that knowledge production and exchange is a socially constructed process that does not occur only in the mind of an apprentice.¹ Affirming this shift from psychological to social learning, the authors elaborated the notion of "legitimate peripheral participation" to describe the dynamics leading to participants' wholesome involvement in the socio-cultural practices of a particular community.² Building on such an analytical frame, Jane Anderson et al. have recently developed a flexible framework for live projects, expanding their boundaries beyond the 'live build' only.³ The engagement of learners in a nexus of communities' socio-cultural practices is central to this expanded definition. Such inclusive delineation of the ingredients which make a project "live" is essential for reflecting on pedagogical experiences that do not have the prime objective of culminating in a physically tangible construction but focus rather on the generation of critical thinking and reflecting on the positionality of one's practice.

At the Department of Architecture of the KU Leuven, process-based urban transformations have been explored through long-term engagement with the Global South in a variety of contexts and institutional/academic frameworks. Education and research within a postgraduate programme on Architecture and Human Settlements – now running for almost 40 years – have been part and parcel of this commitment, and students from a wide range of backgrounds, working experiences and geographic origin have been prime participants.⁴ Alongside this endeavor, undergraduate work in the context of the Global South's uneven and unequal (urban) development has gained growing vigour, supported by a number of individual travel grants funded by the VLIR-UOS.⁵ While there are several challenges to overcome in the way the scholarship profiles and outputs are framed, their existence has allowed for a considerable amount of final year architecture-engineering students from Flanders to experience immersive fieldwork and tackle issues of 'developmental relevance' in their thesis work. The latter experience will be the main focus of

this contribution because of the particular challenges it exposes vis-à-vis action-learning in cities of the Global South.

The travel fund expects grantees to spend a minimum of 8 weeks in one of the 54 countries on the VLIR list,⁶ allowing for a research period which is longer than intensive 2-week workshops commonly related to design studio work, but shorter than the immersive stay of ethnographers and anthropologists with whom we collaborate on several occasions. For many students it is the first extended and non-touristic involvement in the Global South, allowing them to live in the communities they will be completing research in. Their first experience is therefore also a first-hand experience. To date NGOs, training centers and higher education institutions have been preferred partners to set up collaborative research questions which student work can contribute to, acknowledging VLIR's mission to search for sustainable solutions to social challenges deriving from global threats, such as poverty, migration and climate change. The 'developmental relevance' of the research topics is therefore a chief requirement to earn a grant, and for their final thesis students have worked in domains as varied as post-occupancy assessments of social housing projects and slum upgrading initiatives, or research-by-design work in water management, as well as envisioning futures for Palestinian refugee camps.

Modern Living in Contested Territories of the non-West

One of the sub-themes students have tackled in the past years consists of a research topic titled '*Modern living in contested territories of the non-West*', where active learning is framed in the context of understanding and documenting the dwelling practices of increasingly vulnerable communities in the rapidly transforming metropolitan areas of the Global South. While not culminating in actually built projects or approved master plans, these experiences have been conceived to expose students to the importance of giving voice to communities' tacit knowledge before developing recommendations and proposals. This process is in stark contrast with the comfortable professional environment students have commonly been embedded in until their experience abroad,

where the role of architects is well-established, professionally respected and rarely put into question vis-à-vis the production and reproduction of inequality within cities. Likewise, this environment seldom relates to clients who cannot afford and/or recognize design practitioners as their partners in urban transformation.

In such a context, the ambition to apprehend and uncover city-making practices has first and foremost rendered necessary the exploration and assemblage of notions considered relevant for self-built environments and for contested spaces, where 'voicing' user-based design and re-positioning the idea of architects as sole or prominent makers of an urban environment is crucial. More specifically, the notion of 'lived-in' architecture has been developed as a premise to understand how urban dwellers contribute to the production of urban environments in the context of forced resettlement and insecure urban futures. Stretching further than a post-occupancy evaluation of resettlement projects, lived-in architecture analysis stresses the dialectic relationship between urban artifacts and user-based transformations.⁷ As such, it has the potential to provide insight on the capacity of self-builders but also on the value of designed spaces that may encourage users' appropriation.

Placing Space, Scaling Design

For students, action-learning in the Global South within the context of 'lived-in' architecture is an experience that strives to stimulate a reflection on positionality and the diversity of ways in which this affects both their worldviews and their understanding of design practice. Essential points of reflection that have emerged from the experiences of previous years are as follows:

Mapping the palimpsest

Dealing with human settlements located in the Global South requires the sharpening of one's gaze towards the complexities and injustices underlying (urban) development; a process students have not necessarily been confronted with in their studies prior to their departure. This implies that even standardized urban analysis tools need to be questioned and reformulated in order to represent the history of contested spaces. In the formation of territories, the layers that need to be unfolded concern displacement, resettlement, neglect and inequality that all require depiction well beyond even the most refined GIS maps. Such understanding also poses serious challenges, since it becomes arduous for students to venture into a projective representation of the city – that is, however, instrumental for envisioning alternative urban futures – rather than being overwhelmed by its challenges.

Downplaying solution-driven project(ion)s

In architectural and urban design education, projects and design processes are commonly devised as answers to specific difficulties that neighborhoods and other urban sites are experiencing. The retroactive, problem-solving nature of urbanism is intrinsic to its epistemological construction.⁸ In the Global South, though problems may be easily identified when it comes to vulnerable communities experiencing multi-dimensional deprivation, it is rarely the case that students can respond with clear-cut design solutions, especially if the emphasis lies on questioning current urban development modes, such as understanding the social costs of introducing a new housing typology and/or infrastructure.

Gaining consciousness about the scales of design

While many seminal development practitioners have emphasized the impact and importance of 'small' change (and small scale), it remains essential to re-scale design actions 'back to the city'.⁹ Besides grasping the ideas of 'smallness', it is crucial to understand inter-scalar relations, and what many 'small' actions might actually imply for a metropolitan area when multiplied and reiterated.¹⁰ Correspondingly, it becomes of central importance for action-learners to grasp that small-scale transformations may be over-ruled by 'large' change. The field of tensions generated by upholding proximity with smallness and apprehending metropolitan dynamics is the 'discomfort zone' where reflexive practice should actually be located.

Understanding space and practised architecture

Apprehending the multiple dimensions of space, first and foremost as an entity claimed by constituencies in conflict and/or in temporal collaboration, undoubtedly leads to revisiting the role of the architecture professional. The notion of 'practised architecture' becomes central to this process of understanding space (including designed space) as perpetually and dynamically under appropriation by a variety of users (or lack thereof).¹¹ It also dissolves the idea of architects as only producers of space and invites us to read user-based design as a key component of qualifying their living environment.

Great Expectations?

Placing communities first is an obvious 'must do' when being involved in the physical and social transformation of the built environment. The concrete implementation of such positioning, however, is far less evident when it comes to the contribution by design of VLIR-UOS grantees' to communities' improvement. The largest danger in this regard, may be the considerable anticipations local groups might develop during an action-learning experience, fostered by the naïve attitudes some students might actually express.

Secondly, while re-positioning their profession, students may also be inspired to become amateur community developers without recognizing the damage this may generate. Three sets of oppositions synthesize the ethical challenges that action-learners (and action-researchers) are likely to be confronted with when engaging with communities in the Global South, particularly with regard to the legacy of projects that do not leave a tangible, 'built' result behind:

Precision/Integration

Placing one's tools and capacity at the service of local constituencies requires focus and the vigour to avoid extreme disorientation; becoming a 'community builder'/participatory planner is a profile calling for specific knowledge and cannot be improvised. Considering the limited timeframe and expected deliverables from VLIR-UOS, the major threat for communities is to see students raise expectations by mutating from architects and urbanists to 'community' spokes(women). Rather, professionals with a design background can make relevant contributions if they are aware of the specific information they can deliver, and participate in the generation of complex and multi-disciplinary knowledge. Communities can be best served by a precise and integrative engagement, which can also entail the recovery and reaffirmation of a particular discipline.¹²

Intentionality/Involvement

In line with viewpoints that understand the urban palimpsest as the receptive terrain for an ever-changing field of tensions between claimants of contested spaces, communities are rarely a compact 'whole'. Explicit or latent imbalances characterize most constituencies in conflict and for an action-learner it becomes crucial to gauge whether the supposed intentionality of communities corresponds to shared views or favours instead the assertions of a particular sub-group. Co-producing a shared expression of 'needs' is therefore an arduous achievement and a process of community building *per se*. Action-learners from the design disciplines (and more specifically the VLIR-UOS grantees who are the focus of this contribution) are generally not proficient in this sphere, as it does not feature in their curricula. When not always aware of this deficiency, they may misrepresent intentionality (or lack thereof) and/or enforce their own viewpoints as they become increasingly involved.

Exchange/Extraction

In many notable cases, both remote and recent, engaging in the Global South is framed as consisting of a uni-directional progression of a 'knowledge transfer' that local communities are receptors of.¹³ Such understanding disregards the idea of knowledge exchange, whereby for all participants spending time together means taking part in a truly transformative

learning experience. This ambition underlines the significance of 'live projects' (in their expanded definition) as catalysts for interchange, but also points to the fact that without a 'tangible' construction left behind, it may be easier for local communities to be disappointed and feel abused by extractive researchers. Partnering with socially engaged practitioners becomes key to ensuring not only the sustainability of the 'live project' itself, but also to sustaining the enormous efforts of local professionals. For many, striving to reduce urban inequality and environmental injustice means facing extreme difficulties in a context where professional legitimization for socially engaged designers remains dire.¹⁴

From Live to Lived

Action-researchers and design educators working in the Global South not only experience the challenges above fundamentally, but are also confronted with their own problematic positionality and its related drawbacks. Pedagogical offers need to be suited to the requirements (and limitations) set by available funding bodies promoting student fieldwork in the Global South. While this may appear as an excessively pragmatic preoccupation, the reduction of financial opportunities is patent, as are the shifts in preferred research topics, having therefore a strong impact on content development. Although aspiring to stay critical, design educators may stand the peril of becoming part and parcel of skewed developmental discourses while trying to secure funds for their ambitions to materialize, especially given the (growing) scarcity of monies actually released within academia.

Support mechanisms aside, encouraging reflexive practice in a student body eager to discover the Global South for the first time compels design educators to identify (and where feasible coin anew) concepts and methodologies that can both sustain learners' critical explorations and which are embedded in the working sites' specificities. One particular danger is represented by the worrying tendency to exoticize and romanticize 'marginalized' people and 'vulnerable' communities, rooted in a form of paucity voyeurism or 'poorism'.¹⁵ Design educators therefore, need to pay special care to set the limits to potentially morally controversial investigations. Pinpointing working methods and instruments that can mitigate the latter danger while building the confidence of local constituencies in their everyday city-making, would therefore be an essential achievement.

Lastly, although most VLIR-UOS students travel in small groups with a comparable background, the need to learn from the existing and from other disciplinary domains becomes an obvious necessity in the very early stages of their fieldwork preparation. Alliances with social scientists and local professionals are always written into the action-learning experience itself, meaning that students are being prepared to operate in

a multi-disciplinary constellation, rapidly recognizing it as the only effective assemblage for envisioning improved urban futures and meaningful socio-spatial change. More arduous is understanding what the precise contribution of designers may be in such an assemblage.

To date, the notion of 'lived' dwelling environments has fundamentally supported the preparation of students who, for the first time, engage with the socio-cultural practices of communities made increasingly vulnerable by rapid urban change. It builds on a sturdy albeit uneven acknowledgement of 'informal' city-making and the careful documentation of its physical manifestations and socially-driven processes.¹⁶ While some of its tools derive from typo-morphological analysis and the study of 'pattern languages', its significance also resides in the interpretation of user-based built form as the clearest available artifact of local constituencies' socio-spatial requirements. It illustrates both ambitions and on-going conflicts and is a context that reflective designers can document and rely upon for envisioning activities. This mapping (both as basic documentation and as a more projective cartographic exercise) is also a tangible and specific result of what a designer can provide to the multi-disciplinary debate.

Moreover, the time and resources actually available to most local authorities and professionals to document the multi-dimensionality of space and city-making, and then interpretatively map user-based self-building in vulnerable areas, is generally scarce. Where there may be interest, there may not be instance. While this challenge became particularly clear on more than one occasion of our involvement as action-researchers and learners in the Global South, so did its relevance to support the rare but crucial socially engaged design activities.¹⁷ Far from being salvific, a 'lived' approach to design reveals the fundamental re-negotiation of architecture and urbanism's terms of reference as, once again, paradigms change.

Conclusive Interrogations

For the design disciplines, the concepts and methods actually available to action-learners and design educators involved in the Global South still appear to be lacking the efficacy and poignancy of approaches developed in the field of community development and participatory planning. The plethora of appellations used to describe urbanism and architecture is telling in this regard: whether 'handmade' or 'tactical', urbanism seems all about reading into the practices of engaged citizens, whose resources – if properly channelled – can help cities attain their full potential.

The promises of citizen-led urban change may appear to define a clear focus for the adaptation of governance structures to grassroots initiatives. For the design disciplines however, the particular contribution they

can provide in this process remains hazy, especially in the light of ever-more valued self-build practices and community-led transformations. Unsurprisingly, while renegotiating their terms of reference, the design disciplines appear to be engaged in deep thinking about their social responsibility,¹⁸ building on several decades of oscillations related to shifting interpretations of 'development'.¹⁹

While on the one hand architecture and urbanism would benefit from recovering disciplinary confidence, on the other they urgently would need to refine tools in order to sidestep the pitfalls of considering physical manifestations as the main embodiment of a community's expression of needs. Acknowledgement of an expanding body of knowledge from the South is already leaving its mark, stretching beyond the apologetics of socially engaged scholars whose reflections, however precious, are indicative of the 'existential' difficulties the discipline proper is experiencing.²⁰ Design professionals appear in need of a 're-education' comparable to the one John F.C. Turner called out for in the early 1970s, where the critical link between space and society (and thus the particular place of architecture) was emphasized and then became instrumental for the development of significant approaches for 'barefoot' architects and more hybrid practitioners.²¹

Notes

¹ Lave, John & Wenger, Etienne, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991.

² *Ibid.*

³ Anderson, Jane, "Developing a Live Projects Framework and Flexible Methodology for Live Projects", paper presented at the *Architecture Live Projects Pedagogy Symposium*, Oxford Brookes School of Architecture, 24-26 May 2012.

⁴ For a brief overview see:

<http://eng.kuleuven.be/arch/english/education/mahs>

⁵ The VLIR-UOS was founded by the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR), an overarching consultative organization between the Flemish universities and the Belgian government. In 1998 the VLIR gained responsibility for the federal funds for university development cooperation of the Flemish universities and founded VLIR-UOS as the VLIR-secretariat for university development cooperation. For more details see: www.vliuos.be

⁶ Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Philippines, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Laos, Nepal, Palestinian Territories, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay.

⁷ This position is rooted in seminal contributions emphasising the social production of space as an act of agency and post-colonial gesture, e.g. Holston, James, "Autoconstruction in working-class Brazil", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 6, issue 4,

pp. 447-465; see also: le Roux, Hannah, "Undisciplined Practices: Architecture in the context of freedom" in Vladislavic, Ivan and Judin, Hlton (eds.) *Blank_architecture apartheid and after*, NAI, Rotterdam; 1998.

⁸ e.g. Benevolo, Leonardo, *Le origini dell' urbanistica moderna* Laterza, Bari, 1991.

⁹ See: Hamdi, Nabeel *Small Change: About the Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities*, Earthscan, London: 2004; see also: Lepik, Andres (ed.) *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010.

¹⁰ This challenge is well illustrated by the long-standing debate on the fortunes of self-help housing in relation to the evident disconnect between dwelling type and city fabric derived from espousing the model uncritically.

¹¹ Jacobs, Jane & Merriman, Peter, "Practising Architectures" *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, 2011, pp. 211-222.

¹² Pinson, Daniel "L'Urbanisme: une discipline indisciplinée?" *Lieux communs*, revue du LAUA, Ecole d'Architecture de Nantes, n° 7, 2004 (available at: <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/78/92/07/PDF/ArtUrbanismeFutures.pdf>)

¹³ VV.AA., "Pro and Contra: Design-Build Projects as a Form of Knowledge Transfer" in Lepik, Andres, *Afritecture: Building Social Change*, Hatje Kantz, Ostfildern: 2014, pp. 210-219.

¹⁴ For the Ghanaian context, where the author has mostly been working, see: Pellow, Deborah, "Everybody Thinks They Can Build': The Architect as Cultural Intermediary in Ghana" *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol. 19, issue 1, 2014, pp. 56-75.

¹⁵ Frenzel, Fabian, Koens, Ko and Steinbrink Malte (eds.) *Slum Tourism: Poverty, Power and Ethics*, Routledge, London: 2012.

¹⁶ e.g. Rybczynski, Witold, *How the Other Half Builds*, Centre for Minimum Cost Housing, McGill University, Montreal: 1984.

¹⁷ Action-research by students has for example fed into of low-cost housing design in Greater Accra, e.g. Vandembempt, Anke, Van Puyvelde, Eva and Turelinckx, Stef, *Compound Culture Revisited: A lived-in assessment of low-income housing strategies in Tema and Ashaiman*, KU Leuven, Leuven, 2014.

¹⁸ e.g. Lepik, Andres (ed.) *Moderators of Change: Architecture That Helps*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern: 2011; see also: Feireiss, Lukas and Bouman, Ole: *Testify! The Consequences of Architecture*, NAI, Rotterdam, 2011.

¹⁹ d'Auria, Viviana, De Meulder Bruno and Shannon, Kelly, *Human Settlements: Formulations and (re)calibrations*, SUN Academia, Amsterdam: 2010.

²⁰ e.g. Boano, Camillo, *Architecture must be defended: informality and the agency of space*, April 2013 (available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/camillo-boano/architecture-must-be-defended-informality-and-agency-of-space>)

²¹ Turner, John and Fichter, Robert (eds.) *Freedom to Build, dweller control of the housing process*, Collier Macmillan, New York: 1972.