Learning Amidst Urban Practices

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Interrogating Practice

Our aim in the following paper is to reflect on action-learning as a means to engage with the complexity of circumstances and constraints that built environment practitioners have to respond to when addressing issues of poverty and inequality in cities of the Global South. We elaborate this reflection as contributors of a network called Architecture Sans Frontières International, which includes approximately thirty organisations working at the intersection between architecture and international and community development.

Within this network, the work of Architecture Sans Frontières UK (ASF-UK) in particular strives to address the unequal distribution of resources and life opportunities that accompany contemporary urbanisation processes, by building the capacity of community groups, activists and professionals to work vis-à-vis the increasing inequality of current urban contexts. Among the objectives of ASF-UK is to support built environment practitioners in developing the skills and critical thinking needed in order to engage constructively with processes of social change and mobilisation in the rapidly transforming cities of the Global South. Especially concerned with the interface between design and social action, our training and capacity building activities are based on the recognition of the limits of professionalism and specialist education for addressing complex urban development questions.

In her seminal publications on education and democratic citizenship[1], Martha Nussbaum highlighted the risks entrenched in an education model that produces "smart professionals" who are incapable of engaging with any "serious critical thinking about class, about whether foreign investments is really good for the poor, about whether democracy can survive amidst such huge inequalities"[2]. In contrast to education initiatives focusing narrowly on technical skills, Nussbaum alludes to the inherent power of the art and humanities and suggests three key *abilities* that a human-centred approach to education should attempt to cultivate. The first is critical thinking, or the capacity to critically examine oneself and one's own traditions; the second is world citizenship, the understanding of one's own

positionality and of the ties of recognition and concern that link all human beings across cultures and places; the third is imaginative understanding, or the ability "to think what it might be to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself … and to understand their emotions, wishes and desires"[3].

Architecture Sans Frontières UK deeply share Nussbaum's preoccupation with the emergence of a "competent tech and business elite" that is at best unaware of its role in a global landscape where inequalities grow unabated and urban progress in particular is defined in light of economic competitiveness and market efficiency[4]. It is based on the understanding of the existing limits of professional architecture education in particular that ASF-UK was started as a charity in 2007, with the aim to inspire and equip architects to take a human-centred, participatory approach to design and spatial change – putting their skills and experience at the disposal of marginalised interests and communities worldwide (ASF-UK, 2007). In the course of several years, this aim has been pursued through a programme of action-learning initiatives including a set of two-week workshops undertaken in diverse urban contexts across the Global South, and through the development of an independent learning programme entitled 'Challenging Practice'.

In the following essay, we attempt to explore ASF-UK's evolving approach to action-learning in the context of urban development and the knowledge we gained as an organisation through our experience in this area. We first frame our interest in action-learning by drawing some links to the areas of design and spatial practice. We then explore our pedagogical approach in detail through the example of the independent learning course Challenging Practice, run in collaboration with ASF-International. Finally, we address the implications of this work in relation to wider notions of *critical urban learning* and *transdisciplinarity*. By exploring our own journey into the realm of action-based teaching, we aim to articulate a reflection on the ways in which action-learning has induced for ASF-UK a shift in focus from built environment professions to urban practices and an expanded definition of 'learning' within this context.

Reframing Architecture in Action

Along with strategic concerns referred to the specific contexts of engagement of each initiative, ASF-UK's action-learning workshops navigate some key tensions in the thinking and practice of design and spatial practice in contexts of uneven urban growth.

Over the past forty years most literature and practice of urban development have prioritised the relevance of decision-making processes and urban governance over spatial morphologies and practices[5]. Although there are relevant signs of a partial re-emergence of space and design, in the field, nonetheless mainstream development practice and education have similarly focused on the immaterial aspects of urban transformations. Such focus on processes has largely contributed to generating new ways of addressing complex and multidisciplinary questions regarding the governance of cities and the multi-scalar structures of decision-making underlying uneven growth and contested urban transformations. At the same time however, contemporary narratives of urban development tend to be characterized by a stark de-spatliasation of thinking and action. Within this context, the possible roles of design and to a lesser extent of spatial thinking are largely under scrutinised.

Meanwhile, responses to the dramatic acceleration of global urbanisation processes have started to stretch the boundaries of architectural and urban design practice, disclosing a more prominent role for the production of housing and social facilities for the benefit of the most marginalised sectors of urban populations[6]. The growing international prominence of design-led practices such as the Urban Think-Tank and Elemental and the increasing attention towards the role of architects and urban designers vis-à-vis conditions of urban inequality and marginality, highlight the on-going necessity and opportunity of readdressing the consequences of architecture and design in the framework of poverty reduction strategies and urban development planning. Not without contradictions, these practices draw attention to space as a key interface between the processes of urban governance, and self-organised/citizen-led urban transformations.

With others, the work and research of ASF-UK explore these challenges, in a back-and-forth method oscillating between the world of architecture and critical social sciences. Part of the organisation's background lies in the work of Nabeel Hamdi, who has been pivotal in highlighting the role of small scale, self-organised spatial practices in generating urban forms and meanings. Based on this approach, the work of ASF-UK explores the emergence of built form at the intersection between social and physical interactions across multiple scales. Theoretically, our practice is informed by a critical spatial theory perspective, inspired by debates on spatial and environmental justice and exploring the practice of participation in design and planning. We thus connect to a now considerable ground of critique to formal architecture, highlighting the agency of self-organised spatial practices and exploring 'other ways of doing architecture'[7]. The organisation's understanding of design is largely that of a force that can unleash collective enquiry and creativity across multiple scales – articulating new spatial imaginaries as a ground for supporting inclusive processes of city-building[8].

As such theoretical issues remain central to our work as practitioners, one of our key preoccupations as an organisation lies in the construction of learning experiences that can allow participants to mature new approaches to urban practice – simultaneously addressing potential changes in the roles of architects, urban designers and planners vis-à-vis urban complexity and inequality. Developed over the years through a range of international workshops set in challenging conditions such as informal urban areas and post-disaster contexts, the pedagogy of ASF-UK is grounded in the principles of action-learning. Rather than suggesting ways of intervening, these workshops aim to facilitate processes of critical reflection rooted in hands-on experience, whereby participants are challenged to work amidst the complexity of urban practices of governance and self-organised transformation and are encouraged to reflect on their own responsibility to others and their own positionality within this context. With others, ASF-UK defines action-learning as a form of learning which is applicable to situations where participants "face messy problems" and learn by "exploring new opportunities, rather than applying the routine of pre-established systems"[9]. Most importantly, the organisation highlights the ethical dimension of learning in action, striving to embed participants' experiences into wider sets of activities that can positively contribute to the on-going struggles of the local constituencies involved – initiating processes and generating products that have a relevance to the needs and aspirations of our partners in a country. Within this framework, we are interested in the knowledges that can be produced in collaboration with local groups and in service of and in the midst of action – as much as in the process of self-reflection and self-examination that might derive for participants from a mediated immersion in contested urban environments.

Learning Beyond the Field

Across the world, there is today a range of socially and politically engaged studios, summer schools and workshop-like initiatives directed at expanding the horizons of both what should be considered as education in architecture, urban design and planning, and how this should be conducted. Many of these experiences involve critical ways of dealing with communities living in conditions of poverty and marginality, immersing participants in live project situations, amidst the intensity of layered social practices[10].

The educational experience of immersion in these settings is often profound, involving a deep challenge to the mind-sets of learners/participants. At the same time these projects face a set of relevant limitations. One of the key issues highlighted by many is the difficulty in reconciling pedagogical, 'developmental' and community objectives[11]. At the same time, from a purely teaching/learning perspective, these initiatives often assume that participants will engage in an autonomous process of learning and that the location of guided reflection can be limited to the restricted space- and time-frame of the 'hands-on' experience itself.

Based on the organisation's own familiarity with action-based initiatives, a reflection on these limitations has provoked ASF-UK to think of other ways of embedding the process of learning-in-action within a wider space of reflection, whereby the development of critical thinking is supported by a range of different activities. Direct action entails an engagement with contested urban realities that is inevitably more complex than we make it out to be and the exposure to such urban realities is not enough to create new understandings and positioning, nor to produce new modes of urban practice.

'Challenging Practice: Essentials for the Social Production of Habitat'[12] is an independent learning programme initiated in 2012 by an Architecture Sans Frontières partnership involving ASF-UK alongside other like-minded organisations. The programme seeks to enable architects and other built environment practitioners to engage reflexively with the challenges of 'international development' in the urban Global South. Building on the participants' own professional background, the programme offers resources and on-going support for self-reflexive independent learning. This approach implies a key shift of responsibility for the learning process from the teachers/facilitators to the learners/participants, which involves participants developing an understanding of their own learning process and actively collaborating to structure their learning trajectory. As a means to foster self-reflection and allow participants to 'learn how to learn' in this process, the course is divided into four stages: a theoretical online introduction, a two-day seminar, a live workshop or internship and finally, a last stage of deeper theoretical reflection.

Setting the scene

The first stage of the programme is a theoretical introduction providing an initial overview of the knowledge required to engage with vulnerable groups in an urban context. The focus is set on the understanding of urban complexity and of the injustices that underlie contemporary urban development processes – a narrative that many of the programme's participants are not familiar with at the start. This implies that new theoretical frameworks and intervention tools are introduced, to interrogate the processes of uneven urban growth and respond to existing forms of social

mobilisation and change. This first stage of the course is divided into ten modules, which are not intended to have any form of hierarchy in how they are approached by participants, other than the Urban Context module, which sets the context for the overall programme.

Rehearsing reality

The second stage of Challenging Practice consists of a two-day seminar structured into scenario-making and role-playing exercises set in conflictive urban contexts. This second stage of the programme is designed to enable participants to deepen their understanding of the topics covered by Stage One through a mediated exploration of real case studies, where the challenges of intervening as urban practitioners in contested sites are met with the layered realities of different social, cultural, political and economic contexts. This experience is aimed at mobilising the participants' imagination regarding both the everyday life of city dwellers and the processes of urban governance and political decision-making that underscore any design intervention. In the process, scenario-making exercises seek to provoke debate among participants as to how to reshape the practice of urban transformation.

Practicing alternatives

The third stage of the course consists of either a practical internship under the direct supervision of a professional working in the field, or the attendance at a live workshop with an ASF partner organisation. This third stage of the programme includes learning through direct action in an urban context characterised by uneven economic and social realities and offers participants a live immersion into urban practice, to test and challenge the concepts, methodologies, skills, and techniques acquired in previous phases of Challenging Practice. In ASF-UK, this stage is developed through our existing programme of action-based workshops, each of them being simultaneously conceived as a platform for exchange amongst a wider set of knowledges: local partners and state actors, communities/residents, workshop facilitators and participants coming from a multitude of disciplinary backgrounds and individual practice or research trajectories. From the learners' perspective, the final output of the stage is a reflective text where participants are asked to assume the point of view of an actor or a group of actors they met in action.

Revisiting action

The fourth and final stage of the programme consists of the development of a personal written, graphic or video essay on a topic of choice, with the support of a tutor. This stage is designed to provoke critical reflection on both the theoretical and fieldwork components of previous stages of Challenging Practice. As such, the pedagogical focus of this stage is set on the value of post-action reflection, with the aim to encourage

participants to re-contextualize their live experience against wider theoretical frameworks and most importantly, from the vantage point of their own trajectory of professional development. Here, learners are invited to produce a written, visual or video essay that explores the potential consequences of this experience on their future modes of practice. The learner-driven definition of the most appropriate form of narration is meant as a further incentive to articulating a position, which is specific to each participant's approach and interests.

Concluding Reflections on Learning Amidst Urban Practices

Learning exchanges

Along with pedagogical objectives, models of action-learning are often based on a set of preoccupations about the threats of engaging with local actors and as mentioned, much has been reflected on the risks of exposing struggling urban communities to exogenous and potentially extractive processes of learning. Departing from this preoccupation, the focus of ASF-UK rather focuses on the understanding of our training- and capacity-building activities as part of a wider process of *critical urban learning* – which in the words of Colin McFarlane involves 'questioning and antagonizing existing urban knowledges and formulations, learning alternatives in participatory collectives and proposing alternative formulations'[13].

Our focus in the interaction with local communities is thus two-fold. Firstly, ASF-UK strives to embed participants-orientated pedagogical experiences in long-term partnerships and layered sets of activities that are agree with and can positively contribute to the objectives of clearly defined constituencies. For instance, in Quito, the latest of our Change by Design workshops addressed on-going debates around the principles of the national Buen Vivir philosophy – loosely translating as 'good living' – and the need to ground such principles into consolidated solutions within the urban environment. In collaboration with the local university and a coalition of community-based groups, ASF-UK engaged workshop participants in exploring in what ways and through which processes these progressive principles of living could inform the production of housing plans and public space interventions. After the workshop, the team produced a report about the activities carried out locally, which has since then been used by both the community and the university to advocate for mainstreaming participatory design processes in urban policy. As well, a few participants continued to work in Quito as interns, based within the university and working with local community groups in a longer-term process of engagement[14].

Secondly, ASF-UK has increasingly come to approach its pedagogical initiatives as processes of collaboration that are equally centred on the recognition and strengthening of local knowledges. By focusing on the exchange with local partners and communities, ASF-UK workshops have been attempting to generate a space for international participants to learn from the communities involved in the process, in the belief that "exposure to informal knowledge and conditions calls into question existing ideas, frameworks, standards and laws"[15]. On the one hand, this positioning of the process of learning closer to local groups stresses the value that local knowledge and social participation can add to any transformation of the built environment. On the other hand, it is potentially a means to reinforce local processes of knowledge production and to support existing networks and forums of knowledge exchange. As such, more than a method of teaching, ASF-UK's workshops aspire to take the form of active laboratories of knowledge co-production – where learning happens simultaneously in multiple directions, amongst and beyond workshop participants and local networks.

Transdisciplinarity as horizon

Importantly, the two-fold exposure to diverse sets of participants and to communities and local partners has encouraged a process of reflection which has deeply influenced both ASF-UK as an organisation and the diverse network of spatial practitioners who contribute to running its international workshops. At the outset of its action-learning activities, ASF-UK did not have an utterly defined methodological standpoint but understood intuitively that if it was going contribute to more effective and just urban transformations, it needed to combine the disciplinary ground of architecture with multiple forms of practice-based knowledge and multiple spaces of critical reflection.

These forms of exchange and reciprocity (with communities, with local actors, with participants) tease the boundaries of traditional disciplinary fields. Thus gradually, the focus of the organisation's learning practices has shifted from the recalibration of architecture and the roles and responsibility of architects and urban designers, to a wider set of concerns regarding the production of space and the many forms of spatial practice that might contribute to more just and inclusive urbanisation. In this sense, one of the key future challenges for us as contributors lies in the rapprochement of the organisation's discipline-specific background, with a trans-disciplinary approach to the production of the built environment. The aim is to capitalise on design and architecture as method, while simultaneously emphasising the combination of different disciplines and forms of knowledge needed to address the complexity of contemporary urban transformations. It is in the tension between architecture and multiple other approaches that it might be possible for ASF to generate productive spaces of 'critical urban learning' where issues of urban inequality

and inclusive city building can be approached from multiple perspectives. In addition, this challenge implies the altering of discipline-specific approaches, and the integration of different knowledges to achieve a wider definition of urban practice.

Notes

[1] See: Nussbaum, Martha, 'Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education', in *Journal of Human Development* Vol. 7, Issue 3, pp.385-395. See also: Nussbaum, Martha, 'Education for Profit, Education for Freedom' – Lecture at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (Kolkata: IDSK, 2008).

[2] Nussbaum, Martha, 'Education for Profit, Education for Freedom' – Lecture at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, p.7 (Kolkata: IDSK, 2008).

[3] Nussbaum, Martha, 'Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education', in *Journal of Human Development* Vol. 7, Issue 3, p.390.

[4] E.g.: Feinstein, Susan, *The Just City* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[5] See among others: Hamdi, Nabeel, The Evolution of Development and the Placemaker's Tools', in T*he placemakers' guide to building community: planning, design and placemaking in practice*: pp. 1-17 (London: Earthscan, 2011).

[6] See a set of recent international exhibition such as It is worth recalling, among others: "Small Scale, Big Change" (New York, 2010-2011), "Testify! The Consequences of Architecture" (Rotterdam, 2011), "Design with the other 90%: Cities" (New York, 2011-2012).

[7] Awan, Nishat, Schneider, Tatjana and Till, Jeremy, Spatial Agency: Other ways of Doing Architecture (London: Routledge, 2011).

[8] The organisation's understanding of design has been explored by a number of ASF-UK's reports and publications including: Apsan Frediani, Alexandre, De Carli, Beatrice, Nunez Ferrera, Isis, and Shinkins, Naomi, Change by Design: New Spatial Imaginations for Los Pinos (Oxford: Architecture sans Frontières UK, 2014).

[9] Pedler, M. & Burgoyne, J. G., 'Action Learning' in SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice, p.319-332 (London: Sage, 2008).

[10] See among others: Watson, Vanessa and Agbola, babatunde, 'Who will plan African Cities?' – Report (London: Africa Research Institute, 2013).

[11] See: Owen, Ceridwen, Dovey, Kim and Raharjo, Wiryono, 'Teaching Informal Urbanism: Simulating Informal Settlement Practices in the Design Studio, Journal of Architectural Education, Vol. 67, Issue 2, pp. 214-223.

[12] Further information can be found at www.challengingpractice.wordpress.com (accessed 25 July 2014).

[13] McFarlane, Colin, *Learning the City: Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage*, p.153 (Oxford: Wiley-Balckwell, 2011).

[14] See: Apsan Frediani et al., *op. cit.*

[15] Malawi Homeless People Federation, *Malawi Planning Studios*, 2013.