

Dissonant Architecture, Architectures of Dissidence: On the Right to Urban Society

This is a tale of two urban agglomerations separated by a vast ocean: Nairobi and Shanghai. Political and cultural specificities aside, the two share a great deal in common. For both everyday life, architectural difference, and public spaces are shaped by the forces of neoliberalism – privatization, competition, individualism, free market forces, and property rights.

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For both cities urban life is starkly divided by the disadvantage and inequities neoliberalism produces. Along with this come anxious affects that find investment in increased surveillance and security. As such, this essay is another tale: a tale of the mutually reinforcing urban modalities of formality and informality. It is also a universal tale of the larger economic and demographic shifts underpinning planetary urbanization. The driving question: How do growing inequities affect architecture?

Leaning on Henri Lefebvre for theoretical guidance, Neil Brenner and Andrew Merrifield provocatively debunk the notion of the city and the presupposition of a territorially bounded and distinctive settlement, urging us to expand our perspective to think prospectively and grasp the planetary scope of contemporary urbanization. This demands we shift our conceptual paradigm away from the city and onto the urban, conceiving the 'broader geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions of contemporary urbanization processes and associated forms of worldwide capitalist restructuring, dispossession, and uneven spatial development' (Brenner, 2013: 92-93). In this light, urban informality and formality constitute a 'complex adaptive system' (Merrifield, 2013: 913) mutually reinforcing each other as they tango with capital accumulation, distribution, commodification, consumption, appropriation, and displacement.

Formal urbanity: This is the urban pulse of 'profitable capitalist activity' as David Harvey might call it (Harvey, 2012: 6). Put differently, it is an ungenerous urbanity and one that remains unaffordable to a vast majority of people. It is riddled with suspicions toward those disaffected by the neoliberal march across the globe. Such as the paranoid domestic areas of urban life stretching throughout Nairobi that have turned into quasi-military zones where the outer walls encasing the compound are trimmed off with broken glass and layers of barbed wire. On the ground this translates into people routinely moving about in the air-conditioned comforts of the office, automobile, home, restaurant, or shopping

mall. The built form of which are places and architectures of surveillance where the entryways to buildings are guarded by security guards adorned with either machine guns casually slung over their shoulders, or simply a gun attached to a belt. In this urban sphere domestic spaces verge on incarceration. Six to ten foot high walls surround the private lives of privilege and affluence. High-rise apartment blocks neatly package people into clearly defined living, eating, and sleeping quarters far removed from the activities playing out on the ground plane of the street. Air-conditioned cars with windows sealed shut fend off the vendors weaving throughout traffic jams in fear that they might just change their tune and revolt by daring to demand more than a few bob for candy.

Informal urbanity produces and is produced by the collateral damage of neoliberal urban life, all those who primarily serve the privilege of formal urban life. The informal clamor and clatter otherwise lost amidst the flows of planetary urbanization struggles to loosen, untie, and free up the threads of the urban fabric; other times they knot and adhere to it. Urban informality is defined by small scale enterprises, such as the cell phone top up cards sold in tiny pop up structures strewn throughout every shanty town in Nairobi, or the seventy-year old man eeking out a living dancing in colorful attire on roller skates to the melodic tunes of traditional Chinese music in the middle of the traffic free shopping area of Nanjing Road, Shanghai. Or the recycling workers who ride their bicycles throughout Shanghai collecting and sorting the trash of the city, piling it neatly up on the back of their bicycles and transporting a day's work to the cash-in facility. Or the thousands of rural immigrant construction workers living in cramped conditions inside temporary boxes hidden from public view behind the walls of the numerous building sites scattered throughout Shanghai.

Informal urbanity operates out of backpacks, atop bicycles, and over large cloths spread on the ground. It weighs heavily on the hungry, destitute, and underprivileged bodies of the bottom billions navigating their way throughout the urban fabric.

As explained in *Hijacking Sustainability* (Parr, 2009) urban informality is not separate to the formal machinations of urban life – taxes, mortgages, property ownership, registered businesses and so on and so forth. Indeed informal urbanity is interwoven throughout the formal, yet it does not have the basic social services, infrastructure, or safe and habitable structures characteristic of formal urbanity. For example, in 2009 the OECD reported that over half of the global labor force was working without a formal labor contract or social security. The OECD predicts this will increase to two thirds of global labor force by 2020 (OECD, 2009). Informal urban life is loosely organized and yet still manages to coherently plug into the order and routine characteristic of formal urban life.

As formal urbanity entwines the informal, architecture is engaged in innovative ways. On the one hand there are dissonant architectures. When the architectures of formal urban life are inhabited anew such that its programmatic elements are reorganized and reconfigured to better serve the activities of informality. On the other hand, architectures of dissidence rise up in the most unlikely of situations empowering underprivileged groups, defiantly refusing to remain inaudible and invisible.

DISSONANT ARCHITECTURE

Dissonant architecture transforms its neoliberal context by appropriating and placing it in the service of different programmatic elements from which it was originally designed to serve. As the walls of the gated housing compound are



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Figure 1: photo of recycling in Shanghai. Photo by Author.



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Figure 2: photo of mobile restaurant in Shanghai.
Photo by Author.

turned into the hanging space for street vendors showcasing their goods, or when the awnings of shop fronts and office entryways offer cover for ad hoc street markets, or even as the steps leading up to the skyscrapers of glass and steel provide a platform for small scale entrepreneurial activities such as shoe shine businesses or tarot card readers. These are instances of dissonant architecture – when the neoliberal principles unifying the design and construction of habitable structures are challenged to the point of incoherency, yielding to the participatory energies and collective aspirations of informal life.

I am reminded of the bicycle restaurants I ate at in Shanghai. Incredibly complex structures organized and cut to size so that tables, chairs, and cooking facilities could combine to neatly stack on the back of a bicycle. The chef would ride from home to a downtown alley, quickly setting up shop by unpacking the tightly arranged wooden elements, converting his/her bicycle into a stove top, then he/she would quite simply begin preparing a deliciously simple meal off the back of the bike – green vegetables, a little protein, and aromatic sauces that flirted with the senses of office workers rushing out of their tall buildings for a short lunch break.

These are quick, temporary, and clearly defined architectural interventions into the free market flows of capital, goods, services, and people. Sure the cook is also looking to generate a surplus but the way in which this is done is dramatically different to the capitalist ebb and flow of formal urban life. It is uncompromisingly local in scale. The mobile restaurant architecture aligns with the transient program, meaningfully mediating between the street, surrounding buildings, and sidewalk.

Dissonant architecture is the moment when architecture is no longer tied to servicing the macro-urban scale of neoliberal life. Instead the architecture facilitating and legitimating formal urban life is punctuated by the micro-scales of architectural practices in the common interest. In a nutshell dissonant architecture remakes private interest design public and in so doing it institutes new meanings and relationships with nearby buildings and dominant urban processes. In this way, dissonant affects reverberate transversally across a multiplicity of scales as local clarifications of otherwise global phenomena reveal a politics that places the incommensurable forces of global capitalism in question. It is here where dissonant architecture resonates with the spirit of revolt underpinning dissident architecture. Indeed the two are different but not unrelated. Indeed they articulate each other.

ARCHITECTURES OF DISSIDENCE

Architectures of dissidence challenge the contradictory forces of marginalization that a neoliberal ethos propounds. Hacking into the edifice of capital accumulation governing urban life, architectures of dissidence antagonize the cultural authority of consumption, commodification, and lifestyle with permanent insertions into neoliberal urban fabric. This confrontation punctuates and interjects privatized landscapes denouncing the principles of privatization endemic to the everyday life of formal urbanity.

The Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) works with residents living in impoverished circumstances to create what it calls productive public spaces that are low-cost high impact environments. The word 'kounkuey' is Thai for 'knowing intimately' and in this vein the group engages in a participatory design process that partners with residents to create collaborative solutions to everyday challenges that impoverished communities face. Their work spans the globe from Kibera in Nairobi (Kenya), to Bonneau (Haiti), Coachella Valley outside of Los Angeles (USA), to Casablanca. In Kibera KDI have developed a variety of productive public spaces that include

planted gabions and flood protection, a primary school and playground, pedestrian bridge, composting facility, community center, and a water and sanitation facility.

Kibera is an informal settlement consisting of thirteen villages in the southwest of Nairobi. Population statistics vary from the 2009 Kenyan Census of 170,070 to over 1 million residents (KiberaUK) most of whom live without electricity (80%) or sewerage, and who pay rent for their mud and tin shacks (anywhere between 700 and 1,500 Kenyan shillings a month, the equivalent of approximately US\$11.50 to US\$18.50). Toilets are holes in the ground and service over 50 residents depending on where they are situated. Potable water is expensive and hard to come by. The waterways are filled with trash and sewerage, as are the edges of the dirt roads/pathways. When the rains come this situation worsens.

What is special about the work of KDI in Kibera is their methodology. They explain:

[W]orking collaboratively with communities from conception through implementation we build on their ideas, enhance them with technical knowledge and design innovation, and connect them to extant resources. In doing so, KDI empowers communities to advocate for themselves and address the major physical, social and economic challenges they face (Kounkuey, 2011).

After meeting with several of the residents KDI has worked with and the Nairobi project manager there were several distinctive features to the designer's methodology. Instead of starting out by identifying the problems Kibera communities face and the deficits associated with the harsh realities of life in an informal settlement, KDI begins by listening to the projects residents express strong interest in developing. Rather than enter a partnership with a preconceived idea of what should be developed (a reactive position in response to a predetermined judgment concerning what is wrong and how it can be fixed) KDI sets out to activate the strengths of the community. It leans on communities as a valuable resource, working collectively to galvanize the tools of design thinking to address the needs and priorities that communities identify. The latter approach produces flexible and adaptable outcomes that are more sustainable in the long term because they have both community buy-in and are developed in collaboration with the very residents who will use the facilities.

The KDI community bridge connected two sections of the informal settlement previously severed by a highly polluted waterway, saving residents time as they moved from one side of the settlement to the other, as well as lowering the risk of infection and disease that comes from contact with the blackened waterway. During one of my site visits heavy rains had eroded the embankment such that the bridge was no longer safe. I had to traverse the watershed and accidentally slipped into the contaminated waters – by the next day my gym shoes were corroding. On one side of the embankment KDI had constructed a playground filled to the brim with children, it was a much larger structure than the one I visited alongside the water and sanitation facility that had been built in the central part of Kibera.

The KDI water and sanitation facility was operated by women who were paid to keep the facility clean and collect monies from people purchasing potable water from the water tank, or who used the bathroom and/or shower facilities there. In Kibera the cost and quality of water is an everyday challenge people (usually women) have to overcome. What struck me about all the KDI Kibera projects I visited was just how proud the residents were of each and every structure – and pride meant that the structures were cared for and maintained.



Figure 3: photo of playground in Kibera by KDI. Photo by Author.



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Figure 4: photo of Nairobi store and garden. Photo by Author.

KDI creates what could be called architectures of dissidence. That is, their method and the projects that result together form an architectural practice that counters the neoliberal principles unifying formal urban life, which is engaged in a relentless process of capital accumulation. Residents collaborate with the architects to activate their environment on their own terms, working hard to turn disadvantage into advantage and inequity into opportunity. Architectures of dissidence animate social, economic, and ecological specificities by engaging with universals such as water, health, wellbeing, dignity, and care. As specificity and universality are dialectically encountered the environment is transformed into an urban commons that facilitates civic engagement and the common good.

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CONCLUSION

Both dissonant architecture and architectures of dissidence place architectural practices and methodologies in the service of the commons. They are neither sensational, nor fashionable but no less bold. They both speak loudly to one of the enduring undercurrents of architectural pedagogy: create structures that provocatively channel the conditions of contemporaneity. Both dissonant architecture and architectures of dissidence prioritize the scapegoats of neoliberal urban life sweeping the globe.

Together the temporary assemblages of dissonant architecture and the permanence of dissident architectures serve the collective right of people to remake themselves as they remake urban life. Both facilitate a collective right to urban society, not a private individual right to ownership. The political translation of both architectural practices and methodologies is that we cannot continue to take the billions of people deprived of the benefits of globalization and the surplus planetary urbanization generates for granted.

Design in the common interest is an aesthetic of intelligibility and a material articulation of struggle, that in contrast with design in the service of private interests, articulates not the logic of the free market but exactly those forces and affects eliding the suffocating grip of privatization and commodification. It is to this denial of enclosure that a commons stirs forth that design in the common interest dignifies.