

Urban Tactics: Design Education in Shifting Landscapes

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Introduction

The shifting composition of the American city requires us to reconsider the appropriate approach to designing its places by reflecting on our understanding of its history, its context, and its beauty—and then changing our ideas about architectural education.

At this moment, change in the urban landscape is abundant, particularly in the inner city. Radical inversions are taking place. Some people in the inner city who have been cast to the margins for generations by earlier top-down practices are now claiming space for their voices, while others continue to feel the weight of dominant political and economic structures. What had been referred to as margins are becoming centers of community, regaining strength and re-asserting a vital presence within the larger space of the metropolis. These places today are not margins, not sites of deprivation, but sites of possibility, creativity and action. The center-margin dialectic has been turned inside out.

Shifting Landscapes and Design Education

The contemporary city is situated in an evolving world in which global culture is in tension with the quests for regional identity. Citizen control of resources is being overtaken by multinationals. Electronic group identities replace the influence of proximity. Public space is now a space of negotiation and contestation. Concepts such as public, space, democracy and citizenship are continually being redefined in practice through lived experience.¹ As new forms of community and public emerge, the urban context sits in a state of flux, paradox, and difference. Increasingly, cities are a site of complex territorial struggle, posing a dynamic and not yet fully understood [postmodern] condition that challenges our traditional understandings of city. This condition may include the loss of boundary, lack of physical density and ecological balance, lack of continuity or collective agreement, dislocation, fragmentation and erasure.

The order of the past is giving way to something new - new in the sense that it is not wholly recognizable, nor perhaps, should it be. Propelled by global and local dynamics², people from Asia, Latin America, South America and the Caribbean are moving to cities across the United States and other developed countries. Young and old, inner cities are populated with a rich mix of legal and illegal residents, new entrepreneurs, retired laborers and service workers, active veterans, working mothers, the unemployed, the young and restless, the homeless, the disenfranchised and the mentally ill. Collectively, these diverse constitu-

ents of the city are creating multivalent spaces of heterotopia and stretching the definition of what Michel Foucault labels “*other spaces*.”³ This new landscape of the everyday poses both problems and opportunities for architects, educators and students.⁴

The everyday city is a slow city, full of lag-time common places, rich in cultural diversity, shaped by local ritual and need, always with very little money. Based on individual and group appropriation, and the tactical, sometimes illegal use of public and private space, there are no doctrines, mandates, meta-narratives or master plans in the everyday city. For urban theorist Dolores Hayden, it is a social enterprise with a social history,⁵ an aggregate of small pieces respectfully added over time. It is an ambiguous, discontinuous urban landscape of lived experience, an unfolding incomplete context full of unknowns and shifting grounds. It is circumstantial and scattered, open-ended and everyday.⁶

Clearly this shifting cultural and economic landscape has implications for the form cities will take, as well as the education of future architects who will be responsible for developing them twenty years from now. In the face of such urban evolution, what critical headway is being made in architectural education, and more specifically, in the design studio?

Most would agree that design education is not value-free. The structure of education and pedagogy directly reflects specific cultural values and political issues. The explicit inclusion or the implicit exclusion of certain topics, references, and precedents reflects distinct views of the world. Teaching design within a constantly shifting urban landscape, then, raises a number of questions:

- How does one address notions of identity that is responsive to new forms of urbanism and urban behavior created by multiple publics and well-defined inner city identities?
- How does one teach or build in a multi-cultural demographic fabric that creates a mosaic which increasingly does not adhere to any previous situational formula?
- Has “how we learn” become largely independent of “where we are?”

Urban Tactics

In response to the colorful, dynamic complexion of the inner city, alternative ways of teaching design need to be addressed –

especially for schools of architecture situated in relation to them. Design methodologies need to be opportunistically tailored to fit the situation of the everyday, serving either as an alternative approach to, or an alternative approach for, large-scale planning and urban design. Nine urban tactics of engaging the everyday have been identified: *Teaching Tolerance*, *Assuming Ambivalence*, *Incremental Immersion*, *Leaning Lightly*, *Realizing Reality*, *Crafting Collaborations*, *Posing Policy*, *Permeable Practice*, and *Sustaining Sustainability*.

Teaching Tolerance

Design studios are increasingly comprised of students from all over the world. A design studio may be composed of four or five nationalities, with four or five different first languages. Cultural experiences differ widely. How does this play out in the design studio? This diverse composition in cultural background requires greater understanding and a sympathetic ear. Tension increases among individuals and groups who do not understand one another. In a situation of ethnic diversity, design projects that require an examination of what it means to be in the company of another should be presented. Operating in the inner city demands increased levels of tolerance and patient attention in the design studio and the street, for both faculty and students alike.

Design problems can be set up to address issues of cultural difference and tolerance by requiring that students go outside of themselves to understand rituals and tendencies of people unlike themselves in order to draw relationships among themselves through design.

Assuming Ambivalence

Ambivalence entails the simultaneous embrace of opposing feelings about a specific issue. This condition is essential to the quality of open-mindedness that often brings about change for the better, and can lead to action that is guided not by doctrine but by attentiveness to specific day-to-day situations. Resulting decisions are more tactically responsive than strategically predetermined. On-going efforts remain open-ended and inconclusive punctuated by small victories and defeats. In this indefinite battle lies a lesson about how architects can most effectively approach working in the realm of the everyday city.

The everyday city is about the struggle for survival and the attendant blurring of the economic, the social and the domestic. Artists and architects who involve themselves beyond structures and aesthetics do so because they want to make the community a bit better, but they must be willing to work within a painstakingly gradual process with a very open mind.

A good way to demonstrate this to students is to establish a set of parameters for a design problem based upon a given collection of information that seems compelling. Later, come in with a more compelling argument for an alternative approach (whether it has to do with the law, the budget, or a new position

that is gaining favor). Switching approaches is very common in the work of the inner city. To be detached or ambivalent toward one approach or another allows the designer to quickly adjust and move on.

Incremental Immersion

The complexity and diversity of the contemporary city might prompt the designer to slow down, to take a second, third and fourth look. Engaging the entangled domain of the everyday suggests a design process that is incremental and reflective. In addition to understanding the city from above, with aerial photography and site plans, students need to learn to develop a low and slow process of immersion into the everyday. Design methods need to be developed that give students opportunity to creatively navigate the inner city, in the car, on a moped or bicycle, and on the sidewalk, assuming different allegorical roles, always with a watchful eye, looking for opportunities to act upon.

What basic design tools do we have to draw upon in order to immerse our students in a local community and neighborhood? One such tool for engaging the everyday is offered by Margaret Crawford and her call to architects to “listen to the city.”⁷ Crawford suggests the need for architects to reposition their view from without, by focusing in on the auditory rather than the visual. In other words, imposing voice over form. The need to bring listening to the heart of the design process implies that, as a profession, we have lost sight of the voices for whom we are working. Further, it suggests that the very discipline that depends on the visual may, in fact, be overlooking the reality of the situation - the life of its inhabitants and their actual needs, desires and resources. More than just talking, architects need to rethink the importance of the responsive dialogue as design tool.

In her urban design studios at SCI-ARC, Crawford uses this incremental immersion approach—she calls it brainwashing—over a five or six week period. Each week, following readings, she requires her students to visit a neighborhood assuming a new allegorical role: first, the tourist, then the detective, then the flaneur, then the collector, and finally the somnambulist. The students develop an understanding of the neighborhood that is much deeper than their initial view and that yields compelling projects from the light weight (curbside) to the semi-serious that challenge the traditional strategic approach to urban design.

Leaning Lightly

The traditional, cardinal orientation of the architect in relation to society, client and site is also shifting. The Howard Roark, Frank Lloyd Wright imitation is a dying breed. The architect as a lone ranger, a creative genius in full control of the project is out of date. It is inappropriate to perpetuate such myths in the design studio. Leaning lightly suggests that the architect needs to move away from his or her central footing and into the shoes of another. Leaning means depending on another thing for stability.

As teachers, we need to displace the normative, perpendicular position of the architect in relation to the architectural project. The inner city is a colorful and sometimes conflicted and contested context; we need to develop exercises that teach students to move off-center, to lean towards the site, towards the client, towards the program, and towards the city, and to be heavily influenced by these, if not dependent on them.

Realizing Reality

The design studio is too often located outside of reality, removed from the street and the energies of everyday life that make cities so beautiful and memorable. Ideal or utopian conditions set up in the design studio often work against the possibility of reaching reality and the luminescence of everyday life. Artificial abstraction of the city gives a student false and untrue readings of reality. As a result, according to educator Diane Ghirardo, “architecture oscillates uneasily between self-expression and some form of effete cultural commentary.”⁸ Theoretical readings on the city are simplistic and unreliable without a vivid experience of the everyday—the politics, the economics, the smells and textures emanating from the juxtaposition of diverse cultures and places, respectfully situated in mind of others, inscribed by the lives who live there.

Crafting Collaborations

Isolated, nimble manipulations of form in the design studio often advance an agenda of individual authorship and overwhelm the concerns of the ‘other’—of the situation, the inhabitants, the social discourse, the ecology of the place, etc. Too much emphasis in the design studio is placed on individual talent and the ego of the student. This approach in studio leads to a kind of decapitation on collaboration. Isolating the studio and the student within the studio leads to seclusion, autonomy and narrow-minded thinking. The effects of such practice reinforce the production of objects and signatures, and results in rupturing the identity of the city.⁹

Urban critic Raymond Ledrut reminds us that the city is not an object made by one group in order to be sold and used by others. For Ledrut, the city is an environment formed by the interaction and integration of different practices. Ledrut’s definition of the city as the product of social practice strongly opposes the notion of the city as the by-product of experts. For Ledrut, “the true issue is not to make beautiful cities or well-managed cities, but to make a work of life.”¹⁰

Design education needs to place greater emphasis on crafting the collaborative relationship. Design projects need to involve greater degrees of co-authorship. Design exercises set up to involve a process of reciprocity and exchange better prepares students for dealing with the social, political and economic dynamics of the city.

Posing Policy

Design education needs to include a more critical look at the policies that influence the form our cities are taking. Many policies (i.e. rush hour parking restrictions on high-speed traffic arterials) actually have a negative impact on the development of inner city neighborhoods, while serving outlying areas. Part of the design challenge of re-thinking our cities is envisioning how they might positively change with updated policies that foster improved urban environments. For example, removing rush hour 7-9am and 4-7pm no parking in a neighborhood might mean that with cars still parked on the street, the sidewalk feels safer for a young mother walking along with her toddler. The parked cars create a barrier between the speeding traffic and the sidewalk while simultaneously constricting and slowing the flow, thus making the neighborhood safer—maybe even frustrating the commuters enough to make them move closer to the city.

Permeable Practice

Architectural design practice is diversifying. The wide range of design activity in a typical architectural office today challenges traditional notions of architectural practice. This might include web-site design, community activism, teaching, building, interdisciplinary collaboration, programming, etc. The line between urban design, architecture, computing, landscape architecture, and engineering are blurring. Increasingly, the space of design occurs in the overlap, the space between these and other disciplines. We need to encourage our students to engage other disciplines and fields of research.

In a fluid economy, design is an opportunistic back and forth, push and pull, in, out and sideways process. Students need to learn the skills to accommodate a rapidly changing, fluid environment. Contemporary design practice needs to respond to the changing social and economic landscape of the city. This fluidity needs to permeate the traditional boundaries of architectural practice.

Sustaining Sustainability

People cannot live apart from nature, yet they can’t live in nature without a confrontation with it. Critical attention needs to be paid to all of the natural tendencies that surround us. Sustainability is not simply a question of the environment. Creative and destructive phenomenon in nature, human behavior, and the marketplace all contribute to shaping the urban landscape.¹¹ As teachers, we need to develop teaching methods that embrace all of the ecologies of the city,¹² not strictly as a scientific problem but one that is filled with creative possibilities. We can better understand the city if we realize, on the one hand, that it is a series of mini-watersheds and on the other, that mid-night basketball cuts down on crime and still another, that the best way to build it is when it is economically feasible to do so.

Conclusion

Architectural education needs to place greater emphasis on the value of *lived experience*, of inhabiting the world and the everyday. Cities continue to grow in color and complexity, in divergent ways. Following a “tactical” approach to teaching architecture and urban design in the inner city might lead to a greater understanding of and sympathy for the complex forces at play. Responding to these influences as they really are ensures a greater likelihood that the things we build will be the right things and that they can be sustained.

NOTES

- ¹ For a description on “multiple publics,” see Margaret Crawford, “Contesting the Public Realm: Struggles over Public Space in Los Angeles,” in *Journal of Architectural Education* 49/1 (September 1995), p. 4.
- ² Manuel Castells, “Globalization, Flows and Identity: The New Challenge of Design,” in W. Saunders, ed., *Reflections on Architectural Practices in the Nineties* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p. 204.
- ³ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in J. Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture 1943-68* (New York, Columbia Books, Rizzoli Press, 1993), p. 420-426.
- ⁴ In her essay, Mary McLeod challenges Foucault’s absence of the everyday landscape, particularly with regards to women’s issues. See Mary McLeod, “Of Spaces and Others” in D. Agrest, P. Conway, L. Kanes Weisman, ed. *The Sex of Architecture* (Abrams Publishers, 1996), p. 400-401.
- ⁵ Dolores Hayden, “Workers Landscapes and Livelihoods,” in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Social History* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 100.
- ⁶ Reference Exhibition Catalogue of “The LA Service Station Project,” Norman Millar and Chris Jarrett, Co-curators, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1994.
- ⁷ See exhibition forward by Margaret Crawford, “Listening to the City,” an exhibition of new urban proposals at SCI-Arc, in *Off-Ramp*, Vol. 1, no. 5, 1993, p.101
- ⁸ See Introduction by Diane Ghirardo in *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture*, D. Ghirardo, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), p. 10.
- ⁹ See Edward Relph, “Modernity and the Reclamation of Place,” in D. Seamon, ed., *Dwelling, Seeing, Designing* (State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 36-37.
- ¹⁰ Raymond Ledrut, “Speech and the Silence of the City” in *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics*, eds. M. Gottdiener and A. Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 122.
- ¹¹ See Richard Ingersoll, “Second Nature: On the Social Bond of Ecology and Architecture,” in T. Dutton and L.Hurst-Mann, *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 123.
- ¹² For example, see Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971).