Leveraging the city as a laboratory for developing socially responsive design strategies

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special insert
Depoliticising Verticality
in collaboration with Advanced Graduate Design Studio
USF School of Architecture + Community Design Tampa Florida, US

with a contribution by Josue Robles Caraballo
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Credits

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DPU summerLab 2015 series
Potentiality, potentials and design research: notes for a subversive ethos

by Camillo Boano and Giorgio Talocci

Designing in contested spaces obliges us to rethink the conditions of our engagement with the urban realm. In the first five years of its life, the DPU summerLab has aimed to question the way we look at urban environments and in so doing re-write such rules of engagement.

Most of our work has concentrated on areas that were striving to survive pressures of development and the rhetoric of urban change. Or that were the ultimate result of those pressures, confined to thrive as interstitial realities, or in urban fringes. How to perform design research in these spatialities? How to ground in their emergent, recombinant, marginal and often vanishing urbanisms? How to engage their populations while critically reflecting on our positionality as designers and researchers? 1

From Santiago to Beirut, from Mostar to London, the summerLab 2015 series have pursued the overarching aim of unveiling and interpreting the conflicting narratives and everyday socio-spatial practices of the several study areas. In this sense, we asked the workshops’ participants to consider as first and foremost act of design the identification of the latent potentials of the urbanisms they were investigating and experiencing. Their design activities were called to uncover areas of opportunity, available resources, levels of community organisation and mobilisation, but also collective and individual narratives, imaginations, endeavours. Gathering and critically reading this information is complex and, at points, seemingly arbitrary. Articulating design research faces the same risks. Such indeterminacy, though, embodies the potential of design research within the summerLab experience.

Design research is indeed neither static nor structural but is instead a shifting body of conceptual approaches in need of constant evolution, nothing but the constant re-evaluation of ideas and knowledge as entry points and their ulterior adjustment as output. As Findeli succinctly elaborates, defining design research is the essential starting point to make better design questions, but more importantly, to make design and research parallel activities that interconnect along the routes of exploration. We deliberately avoid the use of design briefs, but ask the participants to formulate design research questions during the first days of workshop, in order to ground such questions into the participants’ (collective and individual) understanding of a specific locality, and into the empirical evidence they experienced with their own bodies – walking, talking with locals, gathering, taking pictures and making sketches, drawing and designing maps, sitting in a public space or hanging out at night in another one.

All these activities contribute to fulfil a collective design research endeavour, that neither starts nor ends with the summerLab itself. We land in an apparently tangled whole of overlapping agendas, whereby the workshop can represent an important – though contingent – moment in the recalibration of power relations amongst different actors. It is a delicate operation that makes imperative a reflection on our role as designer and researchers. With this aim, in this publication, we challenged the workshops’ tutors, local facilitators and participants to think what doing design research through investigating potentials might have have entailed, and to question to what extent our investigations had been exhaustive and inclusive toward the manifold narratives the summerLab encountered on the ground. At the same time we asked them to reflect on the pedagogical challenges of doing design research in a one week workshop: how will our positionality reflect such a short term engagement, and how can this build on the previous work of our partners in order to generate afterlives?

In Santiago, Matías Garretón (page 8) puts the emphasis on the extreme diversity of the Yungay neighbourhood in Santiago and on the self-transforming character of its local potentials. He questions the legitimisation of the designer’s activity in contested neighbourhoods and calls for a rethinking of the practitioner’s role as facilitator of the urban transformation, as someone that could negotiate the threshold between the unseen potentials and the barrio’s visible everyday public life. If creativity was everywhere in Yungay, how to find and build upon its collective endeavours? The designer becomes this way engaged in an activity of meta-design, opening up spaces for the ‘real’ designers, the inhabitants of the place themselves, to acquire decision-making power. Luis Valenzuela (page 12) argues that design research makes the design experience a less singular case, and rather, links it profoundly to empirical and transferrable knowledge. Design research becomes therefore a powerful tool to critique
conventional studio-based teaching: these are defined as a ‘reverse’ pedagogical system, whereby students are asked to respond to a design brief but are given no means “to gain a greater understanding of contexts and their elements via their design”.3 Design research instead allows to adapt to new circumstances, without losing the grasp of their complexities.

From Beirut, Dalia Chabarek (page 20) proposes a reflection around potentials and relevance, insofar as understanding a place through storytelling can grow a sense of belonging to a collective (and perhaps localised) endeavour in the workshops’ participants themselves. During the neighbourhood walks in Ras Beirut, participants were exposed to such a density of intense stories that eventually changed their perception of the study area: no longer the site for a design exercised, but a place from where to build a longer-term relationship with the whole city or at least establish empathy and sympathy toward its narratives of change. Diala Lteif (page 24) expands on the ‘designerly’ way of knowing the city experienced by the participants, and to the constant shifts of scale proposed by the workshops’ tutors in order to spark off an interest to gain more and more knowledge and devise new methods of design research. Diala remarks how during the workshop the attention shifted from the end goal to the process, and design research “became an implicit yet fundamental consequence and not so much an explicit focus”,4 with the workshop becoming an important ground for the designerly ways of knowing to emerge and thrive.

In Mostar, Giulia Carabelli and Mela Žuljević (page 32) reflect on engaging the potentials of Rušte and Mostar through different modalities in order to explore manifold possibilities: during the workshop their deep knowledge of the case overlapped a manifold possibilities: during the workshop becoming an important ground for the design class’s ways of knowing to emerge and thrive.

In London, Alberto Duman (page 44) outlines a bitter reflection on the power of envisioning the future of a place as a means to occupy space in it and set forth in time its present inequalities: “What future for the Royal Docks? And more poignantly, for whom?”5. Alberto phrases such spatial interrogation in terms of resistance, meant as the assertion of rights for present communities to take one’s place in the not-yet of their habitat, and emphasises the difficulty of the summerLab’s participants in fathoming the current contested condition of the Docklands and extracting / activating the potentials still residing in such a torn present.

Stemming from the London’s workshop, we are glad to host for the second year the special insert ‘Depoliticising Verticality’ (page 55) with a contribution by Josue Robles Caraballo and featuring works by the students from the Advanced Graduate Design Studio, USF School of Architecture + Community Design (Tampa, Florida, US). Josue reflects on the need for rethinking a community-based approach to the design of vertical housing estates, as opposed to the current production of exclusionary wealthy condos and the shrinkage of ‘affordable’ housing stock. Students have engaged with the reality of the Royal Docks and more specifically Silverton Quays, provocatively proposing socially inclusive housing projects in an area which, during the summerLab, they have heard being rather conceived for the ‘visionaries’.

Finally, the reader will be pleased to find on the back-cover the dates for the DPU summerLab 2016 series: workshops will take place in San Juan (Puerto Rico), Beirut (Lebanon), Palermo (Italy), Ljubljana (Slovenia), Barcelona (Spain) and London. Once again, we will work with a wide spectrum of local partners – grassroots organisations and local universities, architectural and art collectives, research platforms, local authorities. Participants will experience the mushrooming of community-based initiatives in Puerto Rico, question the opportunity for the politico-ecological recuperation of a neglected river in Beirut and the areas in its proximity, deconstruct the impact and relevance of migrant urbanisms in Palermo. In Mostar, they will see how a number of very peculiar urban voids have been turned into contested spaces, and partake in the debate on their possible future. An area in the periphery of Barcelona will be the privileged ground for a critical understanding of the spatial implications of the sudden convergence of newcomers from the most diverse contexts and cultural backgrounds. Finally, in London, participants will experience the interplay and struggle between the plan for a new gigantic development by the River Thames and the site’s past histories and heritage values.

As in the previous summerLab series, we have shaped the 2016 programmes in order to allow a thorough understanding of a place’s transformative potentials instead of over-imposing a totalising and reductive design brief. In the summerLab, the effort and commitment toward thinking design research as an investigation around potentials consists in an ethical shift, a gesture that render inoperative and able to deactivate its communicative and informative function of design as product, in order to open it to new possible uses, new possibilities.6 Design research in this sense does not partake of a populist approach to design, nor does it want to configure as insurgency against a hegemonic debate. Rather, it wants to posit a subversive ethos to the dominant ontology of enactment or praxis, infused with the arrogant ego of creative power to produce and control spatial realities. Only in this way, we can reconfigure urban and architectural around the ‘work of man’,7 as the purest expression of an urban environment and its political selves.

3 This volume, page 12.
4 This volume, page 24.
5 This volume, page 32.
6 This volume, page 44.
7 Quoting the Silvertown Partnership, see: http://brownfieldbriefing.com/36554/newham-approves-silvertown-development
Santiago - Heritage, conflict, urban change

in collaboration with
COES - Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social

The last census showed that – for the first time in decades – the central districts of Santiago de Chile have experienced an increase of their population. This has implied a massive change in the social and spatial dynamics of the area. The several neighbourhoods within central Santiago have faced these transformations in different ways: while some neighbourhoods closer to downtown opened up to massive real estate investments, others have struggled in reaching a balance between speculation, preservation of their architectural and cultural heritage, pressures of new social groups arriving to the area.

This summerLab has taken place in a specific area of central Santiago (Portales Matucana), where these phenomena of transformation and increased spaces of encounter for different social groups have been particularly evident, and where local authorities are currently investing in. Currently, the Ilustre Municipalidad de Santiago (IMS) is working on the “Programme of integral revitalisation of emblematic neighbourhoods and buildings”, developed by the IMS along with the Subsecretaría de Desarrollo Regional (Subdere), the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes (CNCA) and funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The programme has emerged from an inter-sectorial diagnosis of Santiago’s central districts evolution during the last decades – showing an intensive and accelerated transformation of its social and functional fabric, generating diverse conflicts at different levels. The Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES) – our partner in the organisation of the Santiago summerLab – has been collaborating with the IMS, providing advice and monitoring in the context of the Revitalisation programme.

Trying to identify spaces for economic activation, for recovering physical and social heritage and reactivating public spaces, the workshop – building also on the input of local communities, authorities, and professionals – has sought to explore and map out the spaces of social conflict of Portales Matucana’s transformation, and to understand the nature of its socio-spatial tensions. We have worked on envisioning possible pathways and alternative strategies for inclusive and equitable development in the area.
Urban design in backstage: fostering self-transforming local potentials

Santiago’s Yungay neighborhood is an extremely rich and diverse social ecosystem, with Chilean families living on the grounds for over a generation, newly arrived young professionals and foreign immigrants from at least five Latin-American countries.

We found diverse activities: schools, museums, small industrial workshops, street markets, churches, restaurants, metro stations... Above all, we had glimpses of an active and rather confrontational micro-political environment, where small interest groups compete for a privileged access to municipal resources, while others, more consolidated, have established confrontational relationships with the municipality. This situation results in a large part from patronising institutional practices – which can be traced back to Pinochet’s dictatorship – that do not create adequate spaces for citizen participation and involvement in local policies. Paradoxically, this failure has been sustained in democracy, as short-term goals and budgetary regulations impose a very fast tempo to policy design and implementation, where early stage participation and citizen’s control are unfeasible.

How can we be legitimate designers in such a disputed space, where neighbours’ ideas, needs and desires remain unfulfilled? In Yungay, recognised as one of the most politically difficult neighbourhoods of Santiago by municipal authorities, almost any concrete idea of transforming space will be contested, by one group or another. In such a context, to be legitimate and more sensible designers means to become transformation facilitators. In this summerLab, for instance, one of the groups proposed to create an ephemeral interventions toolbox for public spaces, as an instrument for empowering neighbours’ collective creations, potentially opening new ways to inhabit common places. In this way, they placed themselves as meta-designers of urban space, while the concrete designers would actually be the ones living the space.

This position is grounded on the awareness that creative collective potentials are everywhere in Yungay and that they change on a daily basis. During the summerLab, these potentials were mainly recognised as paradoxes, manifested by strong opposites separated by thin walls or narrow streets. Overcrowded rooms face ruined empty manors, locked-up immigrant children – not having a place in overwhelmed public schools – cannot play in empty squares, impoverished blocks are not far away from gentrifying developments. So, should we transform these realities or should we start to reveal them? Should we redesign public spaces or should we learn how to negotiate these frontiers in a non-confrontational way?

In an effervescent neighbourhood such as Yungay, urban design should be more political than technical, it should be a strategy of cooperative local empowerment rather than a set of direct interventions in a highly contested space. We should help residents and authorities to reveal and negotiate these paradoxical potentials through inclusive mapping – an essential step in order to recognize the priorities and ideas for projects that pre-exist our experience of the grounds.

However, mapping a self-transformative reality is a challenging task, which cannot be accomplished in the necessarily rapid survey realised during the summerLab. Instead, mapping potentials should be construed as a permanent reflexive activity of the neighbourhood, because any changes operated in the grounds will modify their configurations. Thus, rather than an input to
the urban design process, inclusive mapping could be a rolling objective of a self-creating space, even a creative activity in itself, one which allows a neighbourhood to learn from its collective processes.

This maybe utopian view is not sustained by the rigid institutions of municipal governments in Chile. Participation in urban policy design is perfunctory, is only informative and is not binding. As told by one young practitioner that presented his work in the summerLab, his agency could not modify the outline of an intervention - as was clearly desired by the neighbours – due to legal impediments of their contract with the municipality. This kind of situations are frequently observed, so citizens have become sceptical of participation calls, as they will be investing precious time to no avail. Chilean authorities are reluctant to implement programs that could redistribute power to smaller scales, as this could undermine their capacity to control public policies that may be convenient to their own political agendas. Local governments in Chile can be autocratic and they have few incentives and mechanisms to be receptive to or to incentivize citizens’ involvement. Moreover, municipal budgets are tight and closely supervised by the National Comptrollership.1

Implementing participatory programmess in this context is like rowing against the tides of a rigid institutional framework.

Even though, this is happening in Santiago’s municipality, where the Community Development Division is actually implementing teams for participatory management of local policies. It has been a hard and sometimes discouraging work, but it continues, as authorities realise that democratic standards are changing in Chile and that the people demand effective participation mechanisms.

In such context the deepest transformative action that we could envision would be to promote the creation of institutional spaces allowing different communities to negotiate urban projects and policies, amongst themselves and with municipal authorities. If the adequate incentives exist, and if an urban design toolbox is available to neighbours, it might be much more probable that self-transforming local potentials will be expressed in creative and constructive ways.

1 Body of the government in charge of the control of the legal aspects of activities in public institutions
Design research is a critical and powerful tool for urban design and architecture pedagogical purposes. Today, teaching needs to acknowledge diverse demands and respond to a diverse audience, to which design research is a complementary way to endure the creative knowledge.

Creativity itself needs to be communicated in a more effective way and also to a more diverse spectrum of interests. For example, during Santiago’s summerLab, the diverse backgrounds of participants found that design research facilitated the understanding of their own disciplines and its impacts on design and vice-versa. Even participants with no design background were capable to link to spatial aspects and implications in their discussions and analysis.

The attempt to explain implications of design decision-making in complex urban context takes place in a more direct way with the ‘instrumentalisation’ of design as an exercise for investigation rather than a final product. Therefore, the design becomes more relevant as an agency of process transformation and negotiation, rather than an element with no capacity of including and negotiating with real life issues. In the summerLab, design research was permanently changing as well as building itself during the process.

Until fairly recently, design was an individual as also a personal quest. The ways to get along a creative route to achieve a design that correctly responded to the problems and situations were hectic and with a high contingency of failure. The design research strategy has shifted from individual design learning towards a collaborative and more integrated process. The experience in the summerLab was that not only a collaborative dynamic accelerated the learning slope, but also that more perspectives where included into the design act, with a better capacity of achieving an integrated process.

Through the days of summerLab, it came to be evident that the collaborative dynamic was substantially less risky than an individual approach. As many opinions came to a common purpose the chances of failure of the proposal were lowered. Collaboration in design research allows being more accurate in terms of its decision-making since it has a constant revision by considering viewpoints and evidence. In fact, also a new kind of leadership emerged. Leadership was a complementary effect of the need to organise the group: the leader was more an organiser in the discussion and facilitator in the decision-making rather than an authority over a team hierarchy. In so doing, leadership was horizontal and equal, aiming at the same time for agreements and diversity of viewpoints – with a strong emphasis on a curatorial capacity almost as a new field on its own.

Studio-based design teaching is a reverse pedagogical system. Students are asked to solve design problems prior to explaining the tools and methodologies for design and not the reverse. Traditional studio work is reduced to ask for a design challenge and wait for the final delivery product, most probably with errors and failures. Then the critic on the experience of failure is transformed into a teaching lesson. Giving the participants the possibility to contrast results with a prior design exercise changes such negative strategy of a failure-based pedagogy. The process reduces the stress and also seeks for a capacity building rather than a result building.

Long standing demand for design implies to include novel pedagogical methods as
design research. The democratisation of design is altogether more successful in the notion of ‘opening’ the design process as research practice. The opportunity to utilise the design of one’s own creation enables participants to reflect on their own design practice as well as an intention to teach students research skills related to design. Integration of data and its analysis through students design proposals is more effective than separating analytical and propositional process. It facilitates the contributions to design as an exercise to measure outcomes without demanding an absolute choice. Design decisions are options with diverse outcomes to be evaluated in terms of its results.

The chances of producing successful design and increasing the practice development through design research training are unique to envision design improvement and submit proposals for such improvement. Understanding success and how design can support success is not an easy task, but when design serves as a context to research, it becomes more viable to understand. In this sense, the overall aim of design research, in general and for the summerLab, is to gain a greater understanding of contexts and its elements via their design. While research shows adaptability to new circumstances, design must cope with their complexities, without reducing their reality – as it occurs in conventional design studios. Overall, design research allows a fluid interaction of design-oriented disciplines with the industry and the society as a deliberate examination and achievement of knowledge. Thus, knowledge procurement has both a theoretical part and a practical one as a way to assess practice and direct future research.

Design research linked to practice has been a central part of Santiago’s summerLab pedagogy, whose design question was related to the municipal research on the study area and possible design proposals for it. Starting from that, more acute design questions were addressed by participants as the design process involved them. These questions have been relevant as a contribution to the on-going research, also as a way of better communicating the design process, and of being able to replicate the process in other contexts. Design research makes design experience a less singular case, based on the strong impact of empirical and transferable knowledge.
Participants’ works from the summerLab in Santiago. The summerLab has reflected around inclusive strategies for governance at the municipal and neighbourhood level and for the inclusive socio-spatial transformation of the Yungay neighbourhood: participants have explored possibilities for multiple active partnerships amongst different actors, and analysed invisible borders (and strategies of transgression) as outcomes of the clash of different cultural identities.
SANTIAGO - Heritage, conflict, urban change

Recuperación de saberes

Construcción desde la colectividad de una huella histórica del barrio, multidimensional y dinámica

Construction from a collective point of view, historical footprint multidimensional and dynamic

IMPLEMENTACIÓN: BREVE PLAZO

HERRAMIENTAS

IMPLEMENTACIÓN: MEDIO PLAZO
Rodrigo Calderón

The formation of a team with a strong interdisciplinary spirit is necessary to achieve a proper analysis and design of proposals. I would like to highlight two aspects of the case study. The first one relates to the fact of understanding the Yungay neighbourhood as a space where different forces converge, structuring the city's artistic and cultural, economic, social and historical dimensions. The second aspect refers to the richness and history of the neighbourhood, and the fact these lie in its great diversity of cultures, which will permeate also the future of the neighbourhood. The proposal emerging from this urban analysis is about the possibility of a shared production of space, based on the integration of the inhabitants and the various uses of space. In order to develop such proposal further, a stronger communication with residents must be pursued.

Yolo De Lucio

While the built heritage is created at a certain time, it is not static, nor should we wish it to be as such. Heritage evolves along with the city where it lies, and with the people who are its real heirs.

David Kornbluth

The complex city needs complex responses – multidimensional and multidisciplinary ones. I think the summerLab is an attempt in that direction. The city of the future demands answers which are mindful of the current and historical times, and the work we did during the summerLab grounds in this statement. I think two characteristics of our work are particularly relevant: 1) there cannot be a pre-set brief, or a proposal agreed a priori; 2) design responses must be instead constructed building on our capacity to shape and forecast a collective urban vision.

Linda Schilling

One of the most important diagnostic elements at the time of the proposal for the case study was the different information given by the lecturers: this allowed us to adjust our lenses of analysis whenever it was time to walk the neighborhood to understand how it was inhabited. This led to different types of proposals but all using a similar language and involving a set of actors, that allowed to open up a few questions about public participation: who has the rights to the city, how do you make public policies to regulate the real estate market, and, first of all, how do you define a neighborhood?

Jason Cheung

The presentations and lectures given by various stakeholders, including scholars and local organisation leaders, enabled us to have a holistic view of the neighbourhood. Yet I would consider the observation and exploratory mapping to be the key elements. The group discussion and observation enabled us to work closely in detecting the issues and paradoxes and designing the interventions. They encouraged us to think what is beyond the interventions, who are the main actors and who is to sustain the development of interventions.

Teresa Ropert

This was a motivating experience to further develop critical thinking in dialogue with research in the field of urbanism. An important aspect was the invisibility of certain groups, in addition to the separation between the ideals of social imaginary associated with the Yungay neighbourhood and the subjective experience of its present inhabitants – often not involved in inclusive participation processes aimed to tackle and modify former collective representations. The confluence of social issues such as immigration, socio-economic differences, the problems associated with housing, neglect or negligent care of children and elderly, among others, are realities that the Yungay neighbourhood shares with other areas of Santiago.

One of the central aspects of our proposal was structured around a multi-level development of the intervention, which included a continued integration of social and urban considerations of the problem. Moreover, we established a temporary process defined by steps that allowed to work holistically from the scale of the street / passage (local) to the interconnection of strategic points that could eventually become a (neighbourhood) articulated network scale. Finally, the intervention included a systematic work with narratives of the local people which, in a process of gathering subjective information through individual interviews, focused on the representation and understanding of specific spots of Yungay. It was proposed that these personal narratives could then gradually articulate into a wider collective narrative integrating the neighbourhood's history. The ultimate aim of the intervention was to achieve, through a process of socio-spatial representation of individual and neighbourhood narratives, the visibility of marginalised groups in the territory, promoting with this the construction of a collective identity, addressing the current exclusionary dynamics of fragmentation.

Further inquiries about the subjective perspective of people living in changing communities should include a long time planning to integrate bottom up strategies, a constant systematisation of the collective work, the feelings and thoughts of the community about what needs to be changed and promoted in this kind of complex interventions. As a group, we considered very important not only to evaluate the spatial configuration or the urban organisation of the neighbourhood, but also to interrogate the subjective experience of actual inhabitants. We thought it would be interesting to interview the neighbourhood’s inhabitants, from the beginning of our immersion in the territory, and ask them how it was to live there nowadays. Nevertheless, some difficulties were confronted in those quite informal interviews, mainly due to the fact that we lacked proper preparation: it could have been important to have more time, in the group, to plan not only the strategic places where we were going to search for participants, but also to prepare a speech to present ourselves and maybe even a confidentiality agreement. That kind of preparation would, I think, not only support our position in front of the neighbours but, more importantly, help them to talk more freely about their feelings and their community.

Elizabeth Crump

In terms of re-discovery, what has really struck me is how my way of working and therefore thinking has changed after three years in industry. I realise my way of approaching issues, conflicts or problems, is through a very pragmatic decision-making process. The summerLab week has enabled me to re-discover a more open-minded thought process and ability to be more expressive. I think the week was well organized and with hindsight I really liked the way presentations were given and complemented the ongoing fieldwork. This contributed greatly to a very thought-provoking week and subtly motivated us to consistently question ideas. As soon as I thought I had arrived at a conclusion or concept, I once again was shown something that made me question and challenge myself to find alternatives.
Beirut - Imagining bliss
in collaboration with
AUB Neighborhood Initiative & Design Department,
Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts/ University of Balamand

The establishment of the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the mid-19th century contributed greatly to the ever-changing urban growth of the Ras Beirut district. Once a farming community far from the gated old city of Beirut, the area has transformed over the past 150 years into an urban educational and commercial hub in the heart of the city. Across from the campus along Bliss Street, urban villas with gardens converted into low to medium rise mixed-use buildings into the early 20th century. Bliss Street currently presents the juxtaposition of a green campus with traditional red-tiled buildings on one side, and a jam-packed urbanised strip on the other. In certain segments of Bliss Street, developers are capitalising on spectacular views of the campus, Mediterranean Sea and Mount Lebanon, to develop luxury residential towers facing AUB.

Despite the political turmoil in the country, international capital is still finding its home in the speculative real-estate sector, accelerating the process of gentrification particularly in the capital. In Ras Beirut, as elsewhere in city, gentrification is changing the character of the area and long-standing residents and shops are being displaced; such trends are affecting the very social and urban fabric of neighbourhood and its main street.

The Beirut summerLab has sought to imagine alternative visions for Bliss Street at a time of dramatic urban transformation. The workshop has provided participants with the opportunity to investigate the dynamics that define and shape the street within the wider context of the city. Through understanding the history of the street and its wider surroundings, mapping its activities, and interacting with the different groups of stakeholders, the participants collaborated to develop proposals envisioning a liveable, prosperous and inclusive future for its many realities.
BEIRUT - Imagining bliss

A Blissful Story on the Potential of Ras Beirut

by Dalia Chabarek

At a presentation in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the American University of Beirut (AUB), Dr. Mona Fawaz, Professor of Urban Planning, discussed the local relevance of an individual’s accomplishments and aspirations, and how this can inspire one to think creatively about positive change in the local context. As an example, she described a recent publication that she and her colleagues worked on about public spaces in the city of Beirut (or the lack thereof) as a study that pinpoints the relevance and potentials of what can be classified as existing public spaces, rather than a critique of their absence. Relevance and potential are to the greatest part the concepts that have made the Beirut summerLab this year so stimulating, starting with the intended pun in the title of the workshop: Imagining Bliss.

The interplay of potential and change

Urban change has for long been the repetitive scheme in Beirut, and most noticeably and documented over the past century. The city was only announced as a capital in the early twentieth century, when its port was expanded and became the gateway to trade between Europe and the region. This is also when the city started growing exponentially beyond its original boundaries, and what was entirely the city of Beirut became the new downtown to a larger Beirut.

The change that Ras Beirut encountered, however, was slightly independent from the wider change of the city, and contributed greatly to its growth. During the mid-nineteenth century, Anglo-Saxon missionaries selected the promontory of Ras Beirut to become their base where they would establish a ‘college on a hill’ (a popular concept of academic institutions in New England) overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the Lebanese mountain range, and the city of Beirut. At the time, Ras Beirut was outside the city gates, and was made up of a collage of agricultural villages inhabited by a few residents of sectarian diversity. As the American university (AUB) grew more popular in the region, Ras Beirut became more inviting for new residents and businesses seeking to identify with the western, modern and academic character that the university looms. Retail shops, supermarkets, cafes and restaurants opened up, and Ras Beirut became a largely self-sufficient, culturally and socially diverse, cosmopolitan hub in the west end of the expanded Beirut. A tramline was built to link Downtown Beirut with Ras Beirut along Bliss Street, the southern edge of the university (which commemorates Howard Bliss, second president of the University and the son of the University founder). The University, however, wanted to maintain a physical boundary with the city in order to protect its self-contained, academic and green character. The walls were further instilled, and the university became even more isolated during the Fifteen-year Civil War (1975-1990).

Since the end of the war, the walls still stand, but the changes in Ras Beirut continue. The once agricultural terrain that was transformed into a mixed-use cosmopolitan nucleus is now welcoming high-end real estate development encouraging purely residential gated towers of sky-rocketing prices. Ras Beirut certainly has many assets that stimulate real estate development, including proximity to educational and medical institutions, centrality in the city, and views of AUB’s green and lush campus and the sea.

While many of the residents adapted to the changes of the mid-twentieth century, it has become very difficult to survive the recent transformations. Nonetheless, the identity of Ras Beirut has not yet disappeared and remains a factor that many of the residents and visitors are struggling to maintain: a progressive yet traditional, multi-sectarian, commercial and educational greenest spot of Beirut. But in the midst of relentless and ongoing change, neighbourhoods unceasingly offer potentials on how to become healthier and more liveable. Imagining Bliss was typically an opportunity for participants to feel relevant in Ras Beirut and specifically Bliss Street, grasp the potentials that it offers, conceptualise them and imagine them transforming into reality.

Storytelling for the sake of relevance

Throughout the workshop, stories were extremely crucial in allowing the students to root themselves in the context of the neighbourhood. Many walks were organised, but became more significant as personalities interjected, told their stories and histories, and illustrated their attachment to places. One particular walking-tour was guided by oral historian Maria Abunnasr, whom as part of the AUB Neighborhood Initiative has led The Ras Beirut Oral History Project. The tour intended to narrate the stories of the neighbourhood and how they characterise the streets. The small introduction to two old-time business-owners extended to hour-long conversations, with the participants taking deep interest in them. Other tours within and outside the neighborhood contributed to the growing attachment, understanding and conceptualisation of
the participants to the place. For instance, the political dynamic and the relationship of the city to the sea was demonstrated in the visit to Dalieh, a contested natural coastal space in Ras Beirut that has always been accessible publicly and actively, and is currently under threat of development. A visit to Beit Beirut, the yellow building that stands extremely injured on the civil war’s demarcation line, was a story told by Mona El Hallak, the activist who dedicated her life to saving the building, highlighting the importance and urgency to save Beirut’s heritage and memories. The exercise was greater than understanding the street or the neighbourhood, or even the city. The sentiment within the participants amplified and the sense of belonging to a place was suddenly the conversation that dominated the workshop. The increasing relevance to the context inspired their duty to contribute to the place and the dynamic outlooks that they came up with.

Ras Beirut was no longer a random case study for the participants. While some had developed a longer-term relationship with Ras Beirut, those who were newly introduced to it managed within five days to build a sympathy towards it. This elucidated in the process and outcome of their work during the workshop, as they endeavoured to maximise bliss on the streetscape, across the neighbourhood, and between the neighbourhood and the city.
Design has its own distinct intellectual culture; its own designerly things to know, ways of knowing them and ways of finding out about them.\(^1\)

The designerly ways of knowing, expression coined by Nigel Cross design researcher and educator, refers to the behavioural and cognitive processes that are specific to a designer’s inquiry. The author identifies the core features of design abilities that distinguish this form of knowledge from science or art, such as the propensity to resolve ill-defined problems or to use non-verbal, graphic/spatial modelling media.\(^2\) This theory was advanced in an attempt to define ‘design research’, at a time when this practice was still emerging in the 90s. Since then, this form of knowledge finding through design has become more widespread and embraced by the broader community, leading to its infiltration into pedagogy and academia. In a short and intense educational experience, such as the DPU summerLab, it is relevant to wonder about the importance and role design research can and should play in the overall experience of the participants.

In this year’s series, the participants could be divided into three distinct groups: the AUB students who were very familiar with Bliss street, our focal point; the students from ALBA who were very little or not at all accustomed to the neighbourhood (as a matter of fact, three of them had never been to Raouche, the biggest symbol of Beirut located in the Western end); and the foreigners who had no previous contact with the context. Each of the three categories comprised students and young professionals from different fields, namely architecture, design, planning, etc. This mix between some of the students’ tacit knowledge and the unfamiliarity of others combined with the different skills played an instrumental role in the development of the different projects.

The general approach of the workshop was to create a quick immersion into the space through ethnographic and experiential guided tour experiences and presentations. The workshop was designed in a way to first contextualise the situation by placing Bliss Street within the bounds of Beirut, a city divided between east and west during the Lebanese Civil War, and whose green line, although transformed, remains deserted. Once the broader picture was experienced first-hand, we shifted scales from the city to the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. Students were introduced to the oldest barber and his peer at the flower shop, allowing them to understand the impact of urban transformation on the individual. Throughout the first three days, the deep immersion into the different layers of the study area built a new understanding among the students. This year’s approach – by comparison to the previous experience – was to be less prescriptive in the workshop steps, especially in regards to formal design research tools. The overarching goal was primarily to engage deeply the participants into the context and to introduce them to the different interconnected factors influencing the neighbourhood.

When the students were faced with such a large-scale problem they felt an urge to understand more and thus, without specific instructions, they used their natural inherent design skills to create this understanding. By the fourth day, instead of jumping onto proposals, the teams started using their design skills to gather more information and feedback.

The teams that had a larger number of members from ALBA and abroad focused on gathering more data first, such as setting up interactive interviewing tools on the AUB campus to prompt reactions and gather insight from the passer-by. A team focusing on ‘memory’, for instance, understood that, by using their ‘visual, non-verbal media’ capacities to portray a Beirut with zero green spaces and more built developments, they could get more valuable reactions from their peers. Other teams designed their own process and landed on a proposal as a consequence of their reflection. A group whose name was ‘Space of hope’ spent its fourth day visualising on a map all the connections between east and west Beirut; in an attempt to bridge the eastern end of
town that they knew with the new western neighbourhood they had just discovered. And through the visual exercise they were able to highlight the deserted state of the Downtown area, therefore allowing them to develop their decentralised hub proposal. The groups who were a majority of AUB students – so with a lot of implicit knowledge – used design research to re-visit their local understanding and find new patterns. A team focusing on economies for example identified several ‘personas’ from the neighbourhood, which allowed them to develop an informal economy infrastructure to be shared with newcomers.

Yet, the more interesting observation was the reaction of the students during this intense, undirected experience. When more emphasis was given on immersive research and building understanding, the attention shifted from the end goal to the process. In other words, depending on their initial quantity of knowledge, the participants complemented their understanding by resorting to their natural design skills. At the end, very little form-giving design was presented, recreating what Susan Roth describes as “the extension of design from a form-giving activity to an interdisciplinary process dealing with complex systems”\(^3\). Design research became an implicit, yet fundamental consequence and not so much an explicit focus. This observation emphasises the importance of short and intense design charrettes as a natural ground for the designerly way of knowing to emerge and thrive, since within this short period of time participants do not have enough time to develop a proper aesthetic response. This also highlights the predisposition of students to engage in such research work where their design abilities are well engaged.

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BEIRUT - Imagining bliss

Participants’ works from the summerLab in Beirut: participants devised multifaceted spatial strategies and emphasised the transdisciplinary character of their approach, working at different levels around the key words of connectivity, preservation, inclusion.
BEIRUT - Imagining bliss

A SPACE OF HOPE
Michele Spatari

Three months. This is the time, for now, that I have to live in Beirut. As a fifth and final year student of architecture in an Italian faculty I have to prepare a final project to complete my studies. In these five years I have had the feeling that I have not explored my attitude for the complex, for the diversity, for the political, intended as the construction of the polis. After several months of study, a long phone call with Camillo Boano and a series of lucky coincidences, I decided that Beirut would have been the research field to reverse this path.

I had my own ideas of the city, I thought I was prepared. It’s impossible to be prepared to the power and the energy Beirut expresses. The inextricable history, the dense succession of high rise building, modernism and traditional houses, the checkpoints and the wild traffic, the bullets made scars and the glass facades, the inaction and the overbuild: complexity is the only key to understand this vibrant place. The city itself scream that the collective sphere and the public space is disputed, militarised and privatised. But at the same time its citizens strongly demonstrate their will to reclaim, reconquer and rebuild this public space, square metre after square metre. The memory was the topic that brought together some of us in the definition of the final outcome of this week. Memory of spaces, of circumstances, of persons and especially of stories. We discussed widely about what is for an inhabitant of Beirut, and a Lebanese, the memory of his city and his country. What does it mean to build a memory?

We tried to engage the personal sphere of the people to bring out their desire of the public. I have to thank my colleagues who have allowed me, a foreigner, to participate in a discussion so deeply tied to their origins and their complex history. We asked people, inside the AUB campus and on the streets, to define their country in three words, to describe what they miss of Lebanon when they are abroad and their work, including Roula, Serge, Cynthia, Maria, Abir and Mona. These people are not just architects, academics or planners but they are social advocates, community activists, archaeological pioneers and public educators. It was also inspiring to work with so many young creative thinkers who are the students of AUB and ALBA. Seeing the city through their eyes was likely the most beneficial experience for someone who is foreign to this place. I have seen good examples of youth engagement anywhere and this week was definitely a great way to spur young people to take action on behalf of urban issues.

The challenge of this workshop was the rapidity of our work. I understand the DPU summerLab as a unique opportunity for people with a fresh perspective to quickly observe the landscape, listen closely to local actors and then to feedback creative ideas. Upon reflection I can see that we functioned as a feedback loop for such local actors. We took what we heard and put it on display so as to share in our collective comprehension of what is currently happening in Beirut.

I was impressed by the ingenuity of thinking based on what we learned and I believe this is a testament to the students of ALBA and AUB. They brought extensive knowledge of the internal economic workings of Bliss Street and a personal awareness of their city, which proved to be invaluable for this workshop. I hope that some of these proposals are refined further by the students and in collaboration with the municipality. I hope that the collective memory and the collective emotion of these students will spur the many exciting forms of change that were presented at the conclusion of this workshop. Insha’Allah.

Whitney Burdge

My reflection on the experience of this week starts with the surprise of maybe the tolerance of the people in Beirut over the long-term negativities of their situation here. Of course for any society forced to deal with complex issues without clear solutions, I suppose it is easier to quietly accept it than to let it affect you every day. Obviously the protests are just now happening and may finally initiate some change, but to live here for decades in a place where your needs are ignored on a city and human level must require having to lock a part of your emotions and identity away in order to survive it. It is sad to me to not have any control or participation or association with your built environment, and while there are lots of tiny informal claims of space around the city in the day, it’s particularly exciting to see the collective reclamation and transformation of the city at night. I wish there had been more time to analyse and explore potential for linking the smaller daily reclaims but I think the diverse approaches within our groups unveiled some exciting things.

I appreciated the variety of ways we were able to learn about Beirut – through the stories and histories of the city shared through lectures, through interaction with the university as a key presence in the city identity, through our first-hand experience of the extremes of the built environment, through exposure to places we couldn’t have found on our own, and through the shared dialogue and new friendship between locals and visitors. I wanted to participate in this week because I knew it would bring me out of my comfort zone (including in exposure to the heat!) and the mission was accomplished and I’ve benefited from it on several levels. I was excited about the subject matter and in breaking apart the definition of gentrification as it is reaching a point globally where it can’t be ignored, and I’m looking forward to jumping into my studies in a few weeks for Urban Planning reinforced by the necessity of approaching design problems with multi-faceted perspective. Exciting stuff!

Ahmad Almahairy

Imagining Bliss has configured as a platform gathering creative minds from different backgrounds. We have exchanged individual experiences, shared observations,
and interacted with Beirut, in order to propose – on a collective basis – strategic interventions and visions.

The interesting part of this creative exercise was the series of actions taken in order to achieve a particular end: walking and talking, thinking analytically and critically, allowed each participant to crystallise her/his ideas toward a final ambitious ‘vision’: the last outcomes aimed to create a ‘space of hope’, to build momentum toward a positive change.

Gabriela Aguinaga Gumuzio

This workshop has helped me to learn how to apply critical thinking while analysing a city or a phenomenon. We focused not just on facts and figures and, on the other side, urban theories... but shed attention on the multiple meanings of the urban, on the feelings it carried on with it and on our views towards change. The workshop has showed us different pieces of a puzzle and different histories of the city, which didn't seem to have a clear, direct connection to Bliss Street and our themes in the beginning but that towards the end of the workshop all perfectly fit together, allowing us to understand the topic better and get more rich and creative ideas when designing our projects.

It has, summing up, provided me with new tools for thinking, analysing and creating. Besides, I have the feeling of having absorbed a lot of the character of Beirut, of its stories and about its potentials and its challenges making me want to know more and experience more about it. In a broader sense, the workshop has helped me to better understand and analyse the challenges of gentrification and will help me to be able to better understand other similar phenomena and conflicts in other cities around the world. Lastly, the team work with not just people from other countries and other universities, but also people with different academic backgrounds than mine, has definitely enriched my way of working and thinking and I have learned a lot from the others. I hope I will be able to do a working exercise as this again because it really opened my mind and enriched me in every sense.

Layal Chacar

To discover Ras Beirut, street by street, building by building, to hear testimonies and stories from diverse points of view was a dream I always had as a citizen who loves Beirut.

Each visit sparked my imagination and filled my heart with hope and magic. It allowed me to see the beauty and richness of Ras Beirut and most importantly it gave me the responsibility to preserve this beauty, to spread it, to fight for it. This workshop taught me the interactive research methodology: interviewing people, doing social experiments, walking on the street, documenting our senses, etc. instead of just using the internet to gather information. It also taught me to be more present, to be conscious about the environment I’m in, to look around whenever I’m walking on the street, to ask a lot of questions at all levels (historical, socio-political, environmental, economic) in order to have a deeper understanding of an issue. Also, collaborating with people from different backgrounds made it a rich experience as I got to see a new perspective and a different approach. Overall, I’m grateful for this joyful learning experience and for all the efforts the local facilitators and the DPU summerLab team put to make this happen. Till the next DPU workshop...

Marc-Antoine Matta

On the first day, Camillo Boano asked us what our expectations for the DPU SummerLab were. My answer was simple: I wanted to learn more on urban design and gentrification. But my expectations were blown away!

The tour visit in Beirut permitted me to see my capital from a whole different perspective. While I was taking my city for granted, I instead discovered the capital by walking through its narrow streets and hidden paths that I usually pass by car without contemplating their beauty.

Other than that, it was amazing to get to know people from different cultures, background and nationalities, I always thought it was a very cliché idea and not necessarily true, but surprisingly it was extremely mind opening and enriching. It was great taking tips and guidance from our teachers, who pushed us to the limits to come up with a proposal in the last two days of workshop.

Being in a group which had, architects, political scientists, graphic designers, urban planners and so on was amazing: each person was seeing Bliss street from a different perspective. This taught me to listen to others and learn from them to give the best result.

Masa Charara

Over the course of five days we have been mixed up into three random groups. This was very effective in engaging the different participants to get to know, work and interact with more individuals than usual... especially with a diverse group of local and international students from different age groups, experiences and backgrounds. The time constraint was an effective exercise to come up with effective design solutions responding to the urgency of matters requiring attention. The mental pressure was a good brain workout for fast analytical and creative thinking, focusing on the basics and not getting carried away with trivial matters.
Mostar - Common grounds
in collaboration with
Mela Žuljević (SPKD Prosvjeta Mostar)
LDA-Zavidovici

Mostar has been a contested city for the last two decades. The division was brought about by the complex legacy of the conflict that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the consequent redefinition of internal and external borders of the newly independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Despite the absence of a physical barrier, everyday life and everyday spaces results secluded and divided. At the moment, important projects implemented towards the promotion of peace and reconciliation are led by grassroots organisations that promote bottom-up strategies to re-think the future of Mostar, as well as Bosnia Herzegovina as a whole.

During the summerLab, we worked with the Youth Club Prosvjeta, a local NGO, to propose new design strategies for Ruište, a pre-war recreational resort located 30 km above Mostar. Today, large areas of forest have been lost to fires in the summer, while many weekend houses built illegally threaten the unique eco system and compromise the public nature of the place. The space is primarily used by local hikers and hunters, who sustain their common infrastructure there (mountain house, walking tracks, huts, etc) and the touristic community of Mostar (ski infrastructure). In particular, we worked with the organisers of ZemFest, a summer festival supported by Prosvjeta that aims at involving the youth of Mostar in different ecological, artistic and recreational activities.

Prosvjeta has sought to build on this summerLab experience to devise concrete and holistic strategies to reclaim Ruište for cultural activities, and to create infrastructures able to host new and innovative projects. Participants have been challenged to think such strategies at multiple scales, grounding them in the wider and complex picture of Mostar's manifold realities.
In this reflective piece, we wish to engage critically with the modalities adopted for mapping out Ruište’s potential. We intend to do so by reflecting on three interconnected modalities that we name as organisation|knowledge, action|discovery, and translation|networks.

Organisation|Knowledge. Since the very early phases of conceptualisation, we wanted to approach and engage with Ruište as a space for exploring possibilities. On the one hand, we were aware of the concrete potentials of this place to become again a source of income for the local population by reimagining it as a tourist destination. In this case we mapped Ruište’s potential by looking at its past. Ruište was a place where, before the war destruction, locals went in winter to sky and in summer to breathe the fresh air that “heals the lungs”.

The understanding that tourism was the main potential of the place came from our knowledge, from history, from the idea that mapping out the state of abandoned tourist infrastructures and work on strategies to improve and renovate them was cost- and time-effective also because it was embedded in existing narratives of local rehabilitation. On the other hand, we also felt that Ruište could be re-imagined as a place different from what it was, to serve new purposes and to respond to new needs rather than being solely a place waiting for being re-fitted. Accordingly, in introducing working directives for Mostar and Ruište, we were careful not to be prescriptive, but to leave the participants free to imagine what the place could become - other than a simple reproduction of its lost past. The fact that only very few participants had visited Mostar and were familiar with the history of the conflict meant that, whilst they were eager to make sense of the historical, social, and economic complexities, they were also able to play with their imagination and use their experiences, knowledge, and creativity to imagine Ruište as something completely new.

We proposed to work in groups and suggested three main fields of investigation. As anticipated, TOURISM was one of the topics to which we added NATURE and CULTURE. The idea of exploring the potential of Ruište from the environmental perspective came mainly because one of our collaborators in Prosvjeta, Dex Kosančić (the initiator of ZemFest), has been working for years to promote Ruište as a place where to explore nature, to mobilise people to protect its delicate ecosystem and to promote a lifestyle more in tune with its rhythms and far from the noise of the city. Accordingly, we wanted our participants to contribute directly to Dex’s initiatives perhaps with new and different strategies. The theme of CULTURE was proposed to explore the ways in which Ruište could be re-imagined as a new cultural hub outside Mostar. In particular, given Prosvjeta’s engagement with cultural production in Mostar, we felt that we could work with the participants to extend our existing programme outside the city.

Action|Discovery. Even though there was much planning involved in arranging the work of the participants, sharing our knowledge about the place, and inviting other local actors to share and discuss their visions for the future of Ruište, the development of strategies for exploring the potential of this place came about through action. We organised a series of meetings for the participants to have conversations with members of the civil society, the tourist association, the planning office in Mostar, and representatives of local youth organisations. Otherwise, participants – a group of individuals from different backgrounds, work experiences, and aspirations – were free to organise their time and to choose their own methodologies for researching the field also according to their own chosen research topic.

All the groups conducted fieldwork in Ruište and in Mostar; they gathered material from interviews, observation, and archives. Their ultimate task was not only to draft strategies to explore the potential of Ruište, but also to present them in an exhibition format. The TOURISM group focused on modalities to explore the potential of memories to facilitate the creation of a space in which the past could meet again the present while also guiding the construction of the future. The NATURE group presented two main strategies; the first focused on education as a means of improving the preservation of the place and the second proposed to support and develop the existing programme of organic farming. The CULTURE group imagined Ruište as a cultural common ground - a hub for skills, and knowledge-sharing initiatives connecting city and mountain cultures and they proposed to develop a skills-sharing platform: ‘Zajedničko Ruište’ [Shared Ruište / Collective Ruište].

Translations|Networks. The exhibition was an important space where to think about how to communicate our plans and visions for the future of Ruište to the citizens of Mostar. Overall, the group managed to create a highly interactive space where citizens were asked to express their own visions for the future of Ruište. In fact, the lack of interaction between the local authorities and the citizens became very clear to us during our visit to the planning department. Accordingly, the exhibition wanted to propose a new way of engaging with the citizens by fostering a dialogue among them and with main actors in charge of planning the future of their city. This is why there was much attention to the collection of memories, ideas, and opinions. And this is how the process of translating our reflections, ideas, and visions was able to create an apt space for new networks of collaborative consultancy to materialise. For instance, the exhibition fostered a productive discussion among different actors of the civil society, the local media, and the citizens who participated in the process thus supporting a wider process of civic participation. Overall, we believe that this was one of the most important achievements of the Lab: to facilitate the translation of knowledge, creative processes, and action research into the concrete formation of networks supporting civic initiatives in the city, which will continue operating beyond the duration of the summerLab.
MOSTAR - Common grounds
Antagonistic factions that represent main religious communities are still in power. Yet, Mostar is also a city where several grassroots organisations try to implement initiatives that could create a more integrated and democratic future within and outside the city. In this context, we worked to devise strategies able to reclaim Ruište as a new cultural site also to imagine the future of Mostar as less divided.

The critical interpretation of this design task was particularly challenging. On the one hand, our field of action, Ruište, was outside the city, in a context where natural landscape and ecological richness are the main assets. On the other hand, few organisations were already working there: Ruište hosts ZemFest, the annual eco-activism festival, the Hikers Association have been guiding tours in the area for a decade, and the local government has already approved a new development plan for the area. How could a five-day urban design workshop have a concrete impact here?

First, we immersed ourselves in the local dynamics and we tried to grasp the political, social, and economic complexities at play in the city. Then we decided to focus on the role of design in envisioning possible futures. In other words, we abandoned the ambitious task of proposing new physical plans for Ruište and Mostar in few days. Rather, we attempted to envision strategies for strengthening the existing ideas for the future of the place while also leaving space for new emerging ones: we worked on combining them together and to make them more visible.

Three groups worked respectively on the potentials of Ruište’s as a cultural hub, as a natural attraction, and as a tourist destination. As the final output of the workshop, we worked together to design an exhibition that could present our reasoning and final ideas. Each group had to communicate Ruište’s potentials making sense of how local memories, aspirations and knowledge could be integrated into the proposed visions.

What became particularly interesting was to account for (and engage with) the contested nature of these potentials. On the one level, there were some evident clashes between the imaginaries brought about by local planning authorities and inhabitants and users of Ruište. The main conflicts related to the location of infrastructures and the regulation of future construction sites. But there were also less evident encounters between different imaginaries brought about by groups with different interests, ages and motivations active in the area. What we found interesting was to single out overlaps and points of encounter between those imaginaries, and even networks, capacities and goods that could potentially be complementary and synergic to each other.

Despite being such a small city, Mostar presents very complex urban issues. The city was almost completely destroyed during the Yugoslav wars of the 90s and went through a difficult reconstruction process led by divisive strategies.

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This variety of imaginaries made particularly relevant the engagement with different actors to ensure both the pedagogical success of the workshop, as the local relevance of the work done during this week. In this sense, as a short pedagogical experience, the engagement with local imaginaries required a series of strategic approaches: it meant arranging an intense schedule of meetings with key actors of the civil society and immersing ourselves into the local dynamics, even when we could not make sense of them. It also meant to take full advantage of the possibilities for collective learning. These intense five days attracted people from various corners of the world with different backgrounds, interests and knowledge to focus on the case study. During the week, days (and many nights) people gathered together, so there was a complete immersion in the case and a collective feeling of the city. This collective learning expanded through the interaction with the local partners, the different actor groups we worked with, and the city itself. Let us give an example: it was very clear after listening to Marina Đapić, the organiser of the annual Street Art Festival, that in her view young people (and probably others) were tired of “post-conflict interventions”, and what they really wanted was to embrace new life narratives. The Street Art Festival happens annually in Mostar. International and local artists are invited to re-appropriate a wall in the city to produce a site-
specific work of art. This successful initiative generates a ‘borderless’ city because all the walls in the city (apart from the historical UNESCO protected site) can become spaces for expression, allowing hopeful messages for the future to emerge and become visible. Such an initiative offers the possibility to operate outside the division-reconciliation discourse. Similarly, the encounter with other groups inspired akin thoughts: the hikers wanted to continue hiking and skiing; new groups of young people such as those organising ZemFest wanted to enjoy music and, also, to explore nature for organic food production and the collection of medicinal plants. In this way, to talk to them enriched our perception of the place and the possibility of working with those imaginaries for the final exhibition, linked to the current actions, desires and imaginations of people living there.

During the final exhibition it was noticeable that the collective learning of the group had been sensitive to the various local issues, reaching local people at different levels. Bringing photos of the history of the Hikers Association, for example, triggered many memories in the participants; a member of the association attending the exhibition with her daughters (see image) approached them having a conversation that went from memories to imaginaries and the possibilities for Ruište to become an eco-touristic area; from the images of the past to the possibilities of the images of the future. In other words, by looking at what the summerLab group presented, local people could reflect about their own imaginaries, and develop new ways of looking at themselves too.

The complex history of Bosnia Herzegovina and the rich social environment we explored in Mostar, contributed the right ingredients to produce a great collective learning experience. It was however the group’s capacity to engage with the diversity of local desires, knowledge and aspirations that allowed us to have a rich pedagogical experience, using design as a tool to trigger new (and sometimes forgotten) imaginaries. The summerLab in Mostar was a collective experience, generating a window to imagine Mostar in relationship with Ruište, combining the views of the participants, the local partners and the multiple local organisations we worked with, generating and enriching a unique collective experience of the city.

Top Photo Credit: María Paz Sagredo. Biljana Gaštan, architect and member of the Hikers’ association, with her daughters
“Common Grounds” Exhibition in Mostar by Camila Cocifía Varas. Participants created a highly interactive space where citizens were asked to express their own visions for the future of Rušte, amongst a taste of organic food and drinks from Rušte: organic food and drinks from the mountains. (pictures by Camila Cocifía Varas, and Maria Paz Sagredo).
MOSTAR - Common grounds

Photo by Dan Delay

Photo by Dan Delay

Photo by Dan Delay

Photo by Dan Delay
Dan Daley

Veiled cultures. From Mostar to Ruište and back again, the potentials for expression through culture were thinly veiled. Culture seemed most prominent through contemporary street art. In this post-conflict place, we were told that much focus in public discourse, of which modern art had been salient, was on “peace and reconciliation”. Yet many Mostarians told us these two words were the source of their fatigue. They wished to get on with their lives as productively as possible. Most people, with whom I spoke, said that their greatest obstacle today was a city without a Mayor and a municipality unable to make decisions that satisfied all ethnic representatives. Within this problematic, faith in democratic politics was lacklustre. Even though art was ubiquitous, Mostarians generally did not see art as their catalyst for change.

The engine of tourism had been driving Mostar since its war years and this trend was expanding toward the mountains of Ruište. Although tourism was a strong source of income, it masked a wider diversity of economic output. In our effort to find common ground, my team focused on culture in a broader sense, not excluding art, but including all forms of cultural production. Specifically, we saw much potential in the unique trades and skills. Our skills-sharing platform (Zajedničko Ruište) aimed to create a forum for this knowledge in order to spur a localised network of human capital. By unveiling a broader lens of culture we proposed that common ground could be achieved via local ownership of a revitalised economy.

Bethania Soriano

Articulating a common future: conflict transformation and governance. What can be achieved in the quick-hit format of a workshop in Mostar, with its physical fabric of bullet-pocked façades, coated in ingenious graffiti plainly capturing the particular zeitgeist; where territoriality and difference are explicitly negotiated in a skyline of minarets, dwarfed in the looming shadow of a colossal cross?

The social infrastructures’ fragility is similarly exposed. The generalised scepticism regarding the willingness of political classes to affect change is compounded by an inefficient politico-administrative system, designed to mediate ethno-nationalist interests. This is the backdrop to organised civil society’s actions, within its limited capacity to raise awareness of local strife and influence the course of development. Given this complex, ever-evolving panorama of conflict transformation, how should we address the profound disconnect and lack of meaningful interaction between governance spheres?

The DPU summerLab afforded a unique opportunity to ponder these questions and develop a context-sensitive approach to fostering integration processes whilst attempting to steer clear of political agendas. In exploring untapped potentials, we had to critically evaluate our role and agency, as our outsider’s gaze was not calibrated to see subtleties of division nor could we commit to artificially engineering ‘common grounds’. Our group felt it imperative to equip individuals to improve their livelihoods, whilst providing a platform to allow engagement with management structures, and the articulation of a common vision for the future. By developing a robust framework to implement initiatives built on local capabilities, we envisioned the collective ownership of the city, encouraging positive exchange and synergism.

Hannah Sender

Perpetual potential: Imagining change. Over the course of the workshop, the different groups we met contested the dominant, external narratives of Mostar as a post-war city and concrete memorial to the Bosnian wars. Mostar emerged as multifarious: different versions of the city combined, opposed and conflicted with one another. Hence, the task of defining potentials in this city of many forms was like building on sand, where the foundations are slippery, if not completely unstable.

Whereas the urban planning department had capitalised on available software to imagine the potential erasure of present-day Mostar in favour of conflict-free (but passively consumed) ethno-tourism enclaves, other actors redefined the terms of conflict anew, as one in which city authorities, residents and property investors were engaged in an ambiguous, hidden struggle for land. Conflict over Mostar’s natural resources invigorated these actors – a hiker’s association, eco-festival organisers and activists – to participate in a reimagining of space as a commons. They stated the potential for the collective management of an existing, yet un-colonised place in Mostar’s mountains: Ruište.

The team that worked on developing Ruište as a cultural hub assumed that enough people were willing to be actors in a democratically co-developed and co-maintained space, since they were already engaged with alternative lifestyles and sharing economies. The Culture team developed an infrastructure to enable peer-to-peer sharing and to encourage the development of this new commons, which was projected onto Ruište but would effectively exist in the liminal space between Mostar’s various forms: urban, rural, contested, and evolving.

Renata Summa

Imagining Common Grounds. Since the 1990s war, Mostar is widely considered a deeply-divided city. Indeed, administrative and political divides often cause tension and deadlocks around basic aspects of urban management and planning. One image that is largely employed is that of paralysis: a city without mayor for the lack of political agreement between the parts, pushing young people to seek a future elsewhere.

However, if we pay attention to its everyday life, and to grass-root initiatives and practices, another narrative might emerge. Mostar quickly becomes a dynamic city, where artistic initiatives and creative forms of protest contest and challenge the mechanisms and groups who insist in the logics and practices of the war-related divisions.

During the Summer Lab, we were invited to look at this complex image and listen to divergent narratives. Most important, however, was to identify potential future(s) that can spring amid tensions resulting from these conflictive narratives. Each organised group had its own agenda, and the biggest challenge was to identify how they could enable and constraint a particular shared space, while settling possible common grounds.

Even though focusing on Ruište does not immediately address some of the most pressing urban questions faced by Mostarians today, the mountain could effectively emerge as a symbol of a shared future. By imagining Ruište as a place of cooperation among Mostarians with different knowledge, skills and interests, we hoped to forge new grounds where narratives and practices disregard official ethno-national divisions; and where a different story can be told.

Sebastián Dueñas Ocampo

Environment and Culture in the Relation Ruište-Mostar: Strengthening the Bases for Political Participation. I was surprised by the impressive ability of this community to recover and reinvent itself from the wounds of the war. All my presuppositions about a society encapsulated in the past with no hope towards the future were called into question. Participating in the DPU summerLab in Mostar challenged my assumptions and taught me paramount lessons about how
the apparent stalemate of the present can be overcome by engaging with the past memories and the future potentials of a place. In particular, I now value the incredible potential of art in relation to the discovery, protection and defence of nature.

For our final exhibition, my group looked at the legacy of mountain sports and alpinism to challenge the present (static) image of Mostar as apathetic and hopeless. We also offered to taste samples of organic food grown in Ruište to introduce its agricultural potential and to showcase in the city what activist groups are already doing (how they are making use of Ruište to explore new potentials).

Overall, our contribution envisioned Ruište as a cultural common ground, located in the outskirts of Mostar. We realised that culture and art could become important spaces for change to happen and where people could develop their political rights, reinvent what they are and propose new possibilities for the future. From this point, there is a huge potential to build up this vision about Ruište, its relation with Mostar and a new notion of what it means to live in a place for all.

Maria Paz Sagredo

*Remembering Ruište for the future.*

Mostar is a city where the consequences of the war are still very present in the everyday life. One of the main challenges that we faced when trying to elaborate strategies to reclaim Ruište was the fact that many of the grassroots organisations that we interacted with, seemed reluctant to engage with the war and the division of the city as the starting point of their work. Rather, they are trying to create a new narrative, that challenges the representation of Mostar as a solely divided city. Accordingly, we were asked to develop not an ‘integration strategy’, but a strategy to promote Ruište as a touristic place, like it used to be before the war.

For the final exhibition, our group revisited the past of Ruište as a recreational place where Mostarians would experience the nature and the mountains. Many of the people we talked to remembered Ruište as a place where they would go to see the snow, to get away of the heat of the summer and to have fun and spend time with their families and friends. We still had to keep in mind that Mostar is a city where different groups hardly interact and many of the regulations, from the constitution onwards, reinforce this fact. However, by creating a space where to share these common memories of Ruište, we explored the potential of the common past to reconnect Mostarians with Ruište and Ruište with the city, beyond the ethnic division.

Caitlin Nisos

*Collective healing: Finding opportunities for common ground in people and places.*

While twenty years have passed since the war, there is a sense of physical and emotional residue shaping the political and social environment. Many actors we engaged with reiterated the apathy of the average Bosnian as a barrier to social change—a lack of hope that things can change. While the resulting void seems disheartening, it provides an opportunity to propose a new ideas and ways of being. Our local partners look to common physical spaces less imbued with conflict, such as Ruište, to encourage common symbolic space, as well as focus on younger people, who likely have no firsthand memories of the war itself, providing a different type of space for ‘common ground’. From an outside perspective there was a large, diverse and well-entrenched solidarity action network working with common goals and principles, creating change over time through everyday practices and contestation of the prevailing norms. We saw intergenerational collaborations, knowledge and resource sharing as well as international and pan-cultural networks of activists and agriculturalists.

Interestingly, because ethnic and national identities are so hyper-defining, there seems to also be an intentional release of ownership of this aspect of individuals’ identity in an effort to create common symbolic space in another way. As an outsider, I wonder whether engaging more directly with emotions and memories of the conflict could also serve as the starting point to think together and across the divides, encouraging empathy and hope through difference.

Natalia Rubiano-Rivadeneira

*From Mostar to Ruište: Challenging narratives of division and political disempowerment.*

Perhaps one of the biggest potentials for the future of Ruište is in the number of local organizations working to reclaim the space. Yet, the lack of financing, basic infrastructure and political participation has hindered their continuing efforts. To try to find the possibilities of connectivity, dialogue and cooperation for these organizations was an important challenge. Fostering cooperation and dialogue among active organizations could contribute to influence local policy and political empowerment from the bottom-up through the planning and revival of Ruište.
London - Localising legacies
in collaboration with
Alberto Duman (School of Art and Design, Middlesex University, London)

While the 2012 Olympic Games’ legacy is still fiercely influencing East London development, various pockets of this fluctuating area are already at work to reclaim their place and identity in the midst of capital-driven schemes. The Olympic Village and its satellite developments – in the immediate surroundings and further away following the so-called Newham’s ‘arc of opportunity’ – are only one side of the so-called ‘London Legacy’. On the other side, we see areas containing informal living, buildings that have been squatted, demographic data that remain mostly unknown.

The third edition of London summerLab Localising Legacies has focused on the arc of opportunity’s southernmost chunk, the Royal Docks, and grounded in their current contested transformation. We have aimed to investigate the manifold emergent urbanisms, grassroots organisations, community associations that are struggling to constitute as an alternative to the top-down vision of the Council of Newham and the Mayor of London. Such vision pushes toward a comprehensive regeneration of the Docks, seeing them as “an exciting new business destination”: it has so far attracted foreign investments materialising in developments such as The Siemens’ Crystal, the Emirates’ cable car, the ExCel (now Abu Dhabi Exhibition Centre) and the Asian Business Port. The Royal Docks are becoming a paradigmatic example of London’s wider urban transformation, with big investments boosting a global image of the city while many residents are left excluded or forgotten in a landscape where social deprivation, lack of services, increased rents and high rates of unemployment represent the strongest challenges to their everyday life.

The summerLab has sought to make such contradictions and conflicts visible and tangible: participants got immersed into the Docklands’ emergent realities through explorations to new landmarks, neighbourhood journeys, citizens’ and communities’ inputs. The workshop has configured as platform to favour the encounter of such realities and the design and enactment of a possible new collective and alternative narrative.
Shadows of the Future: the agency of tomorrow’s visions in today’s Royal Docks

by Alberto Duman

To draw cartographies of time into the future of a place is a way to affect the present with potentialities in the making, staking claims on the ownership of possible futures. If the cartographer is also a landowner or developer, this means selling its plots to prospective clients, whilst activating them with interim uses that prime their transition towards the future. In conditions of uneven social justice, the power of developing visions becomes a luxury, a commodity in itself, an exercise of privilege: to envision means to take space in a place and set forth in time its present inequalities.

Our itinerary in the Royal Docks in September 2015 was tasked with reading its actuality through the ongoing agency of its many potentialities. The combined effect of repeated and prolonged ‘envisioning’ exercises mixed with layers of reconstruction on this reluctant landscape, has been to produce a motley state of bereavement and euphoria.

The accumulation of past visions – realised or not – and their lasting spell meet the latest digital renderings of things to come, squeezing the everyday into an entangled embodiment of actualities and potentialities, a place vulnerable to bold spatial assertions but forgetful of its spatial experience: too many grand visions and not enough ground care.

“Who owns the future?” asks a recent book by the technologist Jaron Lanier1. His concerns have to do with how ideas of the future are produced and reproduced within the networked digital economy and its data management but most of all with how power structures and labour arrangements will be affected and distributed by the development of this production.

City-making is at the core of both production and consumption of these visions of future living and working environments – being the problem and the offered solution at once – and the ultimate ground for business development and opportunities, particularly since large amounts of data are produced in them. As the need for urban space grows, large tracts of land such as those in the Royal Docks and elsewhere in East London become rare and treasured assets, rich offerings to the global economy for world-class cities competing with each other; if something has indeed become faster, higher and stronger in this part of town since the London 2012 Olympics, this is the presence and penetration of global capital into its plots.

The Royal Docks at this point in time offer unique opportunities of making visible the layered urban palimpsest, persistently intractable and experimental in equal measure, a real-life protracted laboratory of urbanity for the last 30 years bearing the scars and cosmetic intervention of all attempts to articulate its recalitrant core question: What future for the Royal Docks? and more poignantly, For whom?

Spelled out all over its fragmented geography, these spatial interrogations came up consistently during our summerLab, mostly in terms of resistance, understood as the assertion of rights to take one’s place in the not-yet for present communities – wedged in the gaps of a place going through fast changing times. As our participants reckoned with the complexities of place as narrated by our ‘experts’ (former or present local activists, community organisers, tour guides, scholars) they were also shown various pre-visualisations of the same places across time. Stuck in between a hardly reconcilable dialectic of time and place, they struggled to fathom how we had gotten there, and how to extract what still resides in this torn present that might be positively activated for what is to come.

So, who owns the future of the Royal Docks? For Silvertown Quays – the forthcoming self-styled ‘London’s New Cultural Capital’ development at Pontoon Dock – an answer has already been provided: “Silvertown is not a place for everyone: it is a place for people who wants to reshape their world. It’s for those who invent, create, break and make”2.

The CGI fly-through produced for it, is akin to a manifesto for an accelerated urban development in which literally the video footage is subjected to speeding effects3. As the PR persuasion would have it, this is “London in fast-forward”, taking Silvertown into a envisioned Futurama4 of its own making, reclaiming the kind of euphoric urban creativity historically linked with Expo/World Fair sites or even Disney’s EPCOT reframed as the archetypal smart city.

In here, place-branding takes the language of brandscaping, and place-making is centred on optimising the creative business incubation model. “Shoreditch meets Soho”5 is what we heard on our site visit: Google-
style colour coded areas, a flurry of bars and restaurants, major brands pavilions, driverless cars, incubation of start-ups and home of disruptive innovators, a future citadel of creative businesses conceived in-vitro and connected by the forthcoming Crossrail and a new bridge across the dock. Still, the presence of people flying over the Docks in jet-packs in the digitally rendered images of the future Silvertown Quays, speaks of remnants of older futures – the kind that easily rolls into the nostalgia for a future ‘as it used to be’, offered in Disney’s ‘Tomorrowland’.

But as we walked the ground level during our summerLab, even the most basic map, defining our journey in the unwieldy ‘Royal Docks’ struggled to hold together the packaging of this heavily airbrushed urban identity in which instances of severe spatial and social isolation stood out like jammed time machines in a fairground. Governance structures have come and gone here, switching ownership across Corporations, Council, Quangos and the GLA with the result of delivering a disjointed, partial and highly selective attention to flows, people and places.

According to its own description, the Siemens’ Crystal building in Royal Victoria Dock is ‘one of the world most sustainable buildings’, its top-scoring BREEAM and LEED certificates are undeniable credentials of sustainability and low-energy consumption. Still, through the motto “Exploring cities of tomorrow, today” subtly emblazoned on its jewel-like shape is the actuality necessary to irradiate its sponsored future potentiality.

Like its own one-building Expo, this otherwise low-emission building is the epicentre of radiation of waves saturating the atmosphere at this end of the Royal Docks with data packets of affective urbanism, beaming signals of ‘investor-ready’ city-making, destination tourism and future-driven smart-city solutions. Landed in 2012 just late of the London Olympics, this office building / exhibition venue strategically located at the other end of the Emirates Air Line cable car in North Greenwich, tells its own story of contemporary cities’ ills projected on the backdrop of the looming urbanised future, and promotes its own corporate panacea.

Unsurprisingly, this is Siemens’ deliverable version of an intelligent, data connected urban future, already here in the materiality of the over 2500 individual building control devices disseminated all throughout its built body, evidences of the kind of remote sensing and real-time intervention that fuels any technologically based future scenarios of management and control.

Both the Siemens Crystal and Silvertown Quays developments cast a long shadow over the future potentialities of the Royal Docks. Having been pitched as a unique investment opportunity location at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 and through the status of Enterprise Zone set by the GLA, its own landscape is increasingly shaped accordingly as that of a permanent World Expo site. The kind of urbanism strongly promoted in Royal Docks by its main landowner – the GLA – sets it as a playground, laboratory and showcase for global business, a landing strip for capital too strategically important for London’s world-class status to be shaped by any other interest.

The website launching the tone for a bid for London World Expo 2025 – in which the Royal Docks would play a central role – is foreworded by the famous quote attributed to Winston Churchill “The Empires of the future will be the empires of the mind” in which he summed up how the future world wars would be fought. Whether or not his sentence was prescient of what we would now call the ‘new symbolic economy of capital’ ushered by mobile connectivity and data management, the military context of its source reminds us of how cities are now competing in attracting global investments; furthermore, its use in the official Expo 2025 London bid directly references its most valuable asset as the ‘collective cognitive surplus’ of London, branded as the world’s ‘Capital of Ingenuity’.

In this context, it’s easy to see how the exclusive branding of Silvertown Quays’ development as ‘not for everyone’ but ‘for the visionaries’, and its roles as brand showcase and incubator of business disruptive innovation, fulfils and prefigures London’s current political and corporate leadership and its preferred symbolic narrative of the present and future of cities. Silvertown’s version of “London on fast-forward” appears to be more on cue with one dominant symbolic narrative of culture and capital in the present rather than being projected into a visionary future.

To paraphrase Churchill’s quote further, if the mind of the Empire looks at the minds of Londoners as its own main resource in the solution of global urban problems, the invitation to enter the field of future speculations enters a dilemma as it would appear at once open to all constituents and restricted only to some: the “Here Comes Everybody” of the ‘collective cognitive surplus’ or the ‘visionaries’ in Silvertown’s creative business incubation enclave?

Perhaps these are two version of the same narrative as benign / malign variations, but in
place-specific structurally uneven conditions of the Royal Docks, the aspiration of existing communities to a place in the future becomes instituted in unequal terms, highlighting the difficult coexistence of a ‘place-based intelligence’ with ‘place-oriented solutions’ in a regime of oblique governance.

Aside the futuristic dreams of self-liberating technocratic regimes in our pockets, the small-scale pragmatic attempts of articulating human potentiality in the everyday are driven by community centres and local colleges, fuelled not by data provision but by kinship of place and the forced encounter of communal dwelling.

On the last day of our summerLab we visited the small but meaningful community market in Pier Parade, recently initiated by the efforts of two local community activists and sanctioned by the local councillor; here fresh fish, locally prepared foods, second-hand and other goods were all laid out on cheerfully noisy stalls, in an attempt to turn into social cohesion the evident spatial isolation of this parts of the Docks.

In the early 80s, in this square – barely changed since then – the offices of the Joint Docklands Action Group operated in a disused launderette. As a local organisation they campaigned with the support of the GLC’s Popular Planning Unit against the then proposed City airport and in response produced the People’s Plan for the Royal Docks, a community-centred vision that still remains an actively inspiring potentiality: in 1984 it went in front of a public enquiry and won the airport plans, even though it was disregarded by the LDDC.

But the returning history of ‘visions’ and unfulfilled potentialities in the Royal Docks shows also the fragility and many collapses of capital’s aspiration to make places symbolic of a world-view shaped in its own image: the site of Silvertown Quays between 2005 and late 2009 was the location of another, never realised ‘visionary’ project which showed how the inherent uncertainty of global capital operations and its opportunistic modus operandi also always destabilises what is ultimately trying to control.

Onto these cracks of uncertainty hangs the vitality of new forms of commoning politics as London shapes up for the new Mayor’s election in 2016. One of these showed up a little later than the summerLab’s: in November 2015, the Asta Community Centre round the corner from the London City Airport hosted an event called Take Back the City, a campaign led by “disillusioned Londoners […] ordinary Londoners who are struggling to survive in our city”.

The ‘collective cognitive surplus’ that the London Expo 2025 bid refers to is equally rich of variable potentialities. The knowledge workers of the creative industry from around the world will fill up the new Silvertown Quays start-up units for ‘visionary’ business disruptors. Equally though, an increasingly disaffected and vociferous surplus of university graduates is looking out from within the debt-filled promises of their degrees and might decide to engage with other ways of distributing the rich spoils from the cognitive surplus and its productivity.

Whatever the case might be, the Royal Docks will provide a unique acid test for London in years to come.

1 See: http://www.jaronlanier.com/futurewebrsources.html
2 The official website of the Silvertown Quays development sports this sentence in its opening screen. See: http://www.silvertownlondon.com/
3 See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_5N9oZkixs
4 Futurama was one of the exhibits of the 1939 World Fair in NYC, titled ‘Building the World of Tomorrow’.
5 In conversation with Daniel May (First Base/Silvertown Partnership). This is how he defined the Silvertown Quays development during our site visit on 23 September 2015 as part of the summerLab.
6 In the opening sequence of Tomorrowland, a young inventor – the ‘visionary’ of the movie— brings his jet-pack to the NYC World Fair’s of 1964, which took place in the site of the previous fair in 1939.
7 See: http://www.breeam.com/
8 See: http://www.usgbc.org/leed
10 The official site of the London Expo 2025 bid: http://www.futurelondon.org/about-us/
11 Ibid.
12 Quoting the Silvertown Partnership, see: http://brownfieldbriefing.com/36554/newham-approves-silvertown-development
13 This is the title of the well known books by Clay Shirky published in 2009, Here Comes Everybody, followed in 2011 by Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age, both published by Penguin.
14 See some info about the Plan from the account of someone involved: http://espace.org.uk/archive/peoples-plan/
15 Until early 2010, the site currently occupied by the Silvertown Partnership and its development was managed by Silvertown Quays Ltd. Plans were centred around the conversion of the Millennium Mills into apartments and the creation of a large aquarium designed by Terry Farrell and Partners, called Biota!
16 The London City Airport is currently for sale from its owner Private-equity giant Global Infrastructure Partners (GIP) http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/transport/12060402/Consortium-closes-in-on-City-Airport.html
17 The campaign site is: http://takebackthecity.org/
We apologise. We are working to fix this as soon as possible.
Participants’ work from the London summerLab. Works have revolved around constructing a new alternative narrative for the area of the Royal Docks. Participants highlighted those emergent urbanisms they encountered during their explorations, and designed possibilities of inclusive socio-spatial transformation, of reactivation of the Docks’ abandoned spaces, of strategic alliances between different actors.
LONDON - Localising Legacies

Floating Gardens.
Tuba Dogu

Meanwhile the global clock keeps on ticking, we observe that all times are entangled at Royal Docks; with the present future happenings stressing upon the past. Whilst industrial reminiscences from the past contributed to the formation of today’s urban landscape, narrated future visions by celestial eyes misfit the stories which are narrated on the ground on a daily basis.

We started with trespassing the Beckton Alp and shooting a panoptic view over the land, where we see but we are not seen, where controversies of all narratives are visually present. On one side, we noticed the flow of capital starting to find physical bodies, yet on the other side communities squeezed among blurry future investments. Descending down the hill, we set for hearing narratives on the ground; to various actors who are involved in the near future spatial settings, and community groups who are exposed to these visions.

Our brief encounters with them made us realise that controversies in the area occur due to lack of communication among actors and their networks.

We proposed an inclusive platform for facilitating a dialogue, to stitch the narratives by bringing them on a common ground of balance. Rather than suggesting an alternative yet a tertiary narrative, we enhanced the re-discovery of specificity in the need of tailor-made solutions rather than relying on formal meta-narratives. Thus, we sought for stimulating a coherent cohesion among narratives, by enabling links among actors as the catalysing agents just as in chemical molecular reactions.

Participating to the DPU summerLab was an eye opening experience in that sense, presenting an opportunity to listen to voices that are not heard very often, hence hearing stories that are often neglected in the spatial processes. Paving the paths to places where perhaps no frequent visits are paid except for some landmark structures like the Crystal and Excel, but where visions for East London are written continuously, summerLab made us observe how power in space could be exerted through minor yet strong narratives.

Since narratives embody events, we realised that it is particularly the smallest and inert events where gem experiences are hidden and how attaining a shift in attention to non-physical, rather than the physical measures of space is necessary.

Victoria Castillo

In the final chapter of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs writes about “…The kind of problem a city is…” (J.Jacobs, 1961); a problem of organised complexity. But in the royal docks any form of organisation was difficult to see. Instead we witnessed a morass of issues and lacking opportunities, and the consequences of colliding visions that either displaced residents to other areas of London or attempted to sustain the local community opposed to the changes of government-sanctioned developers. During *Localising Legacies*, the London summerLab 2015, we had the opportunity to study these specific problems through the perspective of local residents of post-Olympic East London and the Royal Docks.

These residents, facing increased rent, changing urban landscapes, and less affordable living options, had to decide whether to stay or leave the Royal Docks, but the local government, under increasing debt and facing smaller budgets, found it cheaper to encourage residents to move to other areas outside of London rather than maintain subsidised housing. Meanwhile different community centres, despite offering services the government no longer could, were not consulted by local officials over decisions directly affecting the neighbourhoods they serviced. In this climate it was difficult for residents of the Royal Docks to believe that their local government was working on behalf of their constituents, and the increasing divide between the government, the local community, and the developers exacerbated the problems within the area. Understanding these complexities and organising them was one of the primary challenges we faced while examining the neighbourhood’s potentials.

In the last few days our team had to decide, from everything we had learned, from the many viewpoints we had encountered in the three previous days, if the residents of the Royal Docks should stay or go. This particular exercise showed the difficulties in building consensus even amongst ourselves, but we decided it was better to include everyone’s opinion at the expense of cohesiveness. In a tacit way we understood that if we compromised too much the results would be bland and barely palatable. We saw that to live in a city meant to interact with many different visions of the same place, within contested spaces. However, these interactions did not occur randomly or in a vacuum; they were responding to realities that, at a quick glance, seemed disorganized, but were in fact part of a system of organised complexity.

Rajwa Abid

The Royal Docks had a very rich history, being the main harbour contributing to the development of London and UK’s commerce.

One of the major problems we have faced was the housing crisis, and the financial demands, many residencies of the Docks had it hard to maintain a balanced lifestyle and to take it for granted, the potential that the Royal Docks had was very evident, thus advocative projects were taking place mostly, it seemed to us as if the new plan was to adopt the eastern portion of London into the western style.

High rise buildings, skyscrapers, steel structures: the first time I personally landed in London, I took the DLR line moving from central London toward the eastern end, and, the more I strayed from the core of the city, brick structures faded, and I was greeted by masses of commercial and office buildings. It felt like this area was a mechanism behind London. It felt cold, and silent, very futuristic, the cranes made the skyline.

Then when we went down on earth and started the analysis: and it felt like home. After three consecutive days of studying the area our team observed that the area had three dominant groups playing a huge role in making it what it is: those who have stayed there, those who invest, and those who are leaving the area.

These groups were not exactly co-existing harmoniously, each of them had a very clear vision of their needs. On certain aspects, their goals intertwined or clashed. The inhabitants of the Royal Docks found it hard to advocate for their occupancies. They have told us about lots of objections they have made against the City airport’s expansion and the walls that have been built and now imprison and divide the Docks into three quarters.

These were not effective, and the Docks could now turn into yet another tourist destination in London. Yet, in our projects, we tried to reach a balance, to minimise destruction and displacement for those that could not afford the new demands for the area. We wanted to create a focal point, a common interest to have these groups interact and add up to the community and to each other. We designed a HUB, a spot that could accommodate for all groups to encounter and co-exist in peace.

Ifigeneia Dimitrakou

“Silvertown is not for everyone: it’s for visionaries”. Who are finally these people...
‘visionaries’? Who makes the Royal Docks? These were some of the questions haunting us during the entire workshop. For this reason, we tried to critically assess to which extent a ‘Supernova’ Regeneration Plan, was able to reflect the multiplicity of stories, narratives, aspirations, struggles and perspectives expressed by the local individual and collective actors that we met.

We quickly realized that the mainstream narratives for the future of the Docks, are not only exclusive but due to the branding strategy, they are very powerful and dominant in shaping the public discourse. Therefore, if we wanted to question the legitimacy of this plan, we had first to question the mechanisms constructing and imposing these narratives and consequently question the approach and content of the proposal.

Main challenges in questioning ‘opportunism’ was firstly to translate ‘opportunities’ into ‘potentials’ emerging from the local visionaries. In other words, to draw the attention from profit-making to people who are able to shape urban futures through their practices.

Secondly, we found difficult to question the project scale and argue that a mega-plan involves equally mega-financial and social risks and that a local, small scale, slow-pace redevelopment process is finally more ‘realistic’.

Finally, it was crucial for our proposal to formulate convincing arguments calling for a contextual approach without becoming naive. More precisely, we have based our concept on sarcastically reproducing branding clichés and on paraphrasing the mainstream, in order to draw a critique on these exact mechanisms and strategies which are able to wash out every meaning and convert concepts and ideologies etc. into plain slogans. However, we found interestingly challenging to keep the balance between critique and exaggerated alienation.

Throughout our investigation and our discussions we realised that the means of constructing every vision, can be equally naive, exclusive, superficial or utopic. For this reason we decided to structure a counter-vision while using the same communication mechanisms.

Our goal was to highlight that a vision or a narrative constitute a single representation which cannot comprise the multiplicity of conflicting interests on urban space. Consequently, these have to be questioned, negotiated and reconfigured through processes and by multiple actors.
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Students spend a great amount of energy deconstructing the complexities of any community addressed within an academic exercise. Any analyses conducted in the vacuum of a classroom presents a number challenges, usually translating into a speculative foundation in the delivery of built space. It is therefore crucial that students reach beyond the classroom walls and build a conceptual foundation from information attained from the community itself.

Intersecting both the cultural and built realm, students are confronted with a big range of ideas to utilise during the development of the design process. All too often students are unable to pierce beyond the visual landscape, failing to understand the local mechanism that sustain everyday life in general. The in depth multi-faceted program of the summerLab provides the students with several methods of socio-spatial cognition, allowing the students to understand in this case the Royal Docks in a comprehensive matter, thanks to the local facilitator Alberto Duman and DPU coordinator Giorgio Talocci. The summerLab served as a conceptual foundation for the one semester long comprehensive housing studio. Students utilised the robust pool of information acquired during the summerLab program in every studio assignments. Students developed several analytical exercises synthesising routes of possible engagement. Each student designed and developed projects to improve the current housing stock and creating new energy for the Royal Docks.

Josue Robles Caraballo (Research Faculty, Advanced Graduate Design studio, USF School of Architecture + Community Design, Tampa)
Depoliticising Verticality

Integration of Vertical Communities

Josue Robles Caraballo

As new state developed housing projects become less popular, planning within traditional means is not a paved road, as the demand for housing is much greater than available built stock, thus creating pressure on both the private and public sector to provide affordable housing. “As of 2009, the U.S. had 5.5 million fewer affordable housing units compared to the number of people who need them.” The current creation of affordable housing has responded, in great part, to maximum capital return of developers, not necessarily taking in consideration local residential needs. Clearly there are many benefits in shifting to the private sector for the delivery of affordable housing. On the other hand, several concerns become eminent as the private sector becomes the main source of affordable housing.

Recently, the Inclusionary Housing Program of New York City along with efforts from mayors Bloomberg and de Blasio have contributed to the delivery of several housing projects by creating incentives for developers to deliver affordable housing in affluent areas of the city. With different levels of success, the Inclusionary Housing Program has aimed to fully integrate the affordable and market housing residents. On the other hand though, in several cases, the built design has stood as a form of gentrification.

In New York City, 2014, over 88,000 applications were received for 55 affordable rentals as part of the “Inclusionary Housing Program” initiative. The 55 units will be a part of a larger market rate residential tower of 200 condominiums ranging from 1 to 25 million dollars. Indeed, the project at Riverside Boulevard has provided a number of much needed affordable housing units, but the project was designed to isolate the affordable housing tenants from the market rate tenants. The isolation of tenants was devised to allow the project to remain attractive to buyers interested in units worth in the millions. “American cities have grown more reliant on the private sector to build housing for the poor and working class. Developers say they can maximize their revenues, and thus build more affordable units, by separating them from their luxury counterparts.” Currently, there is no formal consensus to allocate social goods into combined private and attainable housing. This apparent successful delivery of affordable residences, does not address any level of inclusion for the community. Several design responses have completely segregated market from affordable housing, designing spaces preventing users to interact.

After much deserved criticism, the city of New York leads the housing integration discourse, upon a foundation of success over failure. Therefore, pioneering the way for fairly integrated housing projects. As the days of social housing projects become a delivery of the past, the planning and designing of communities become projects of social integration.

There are a great number of cities experiencing the same housing complexities as NYC, illustrating the importance of social inclusion amongst planning, developing, and design industry. Graduate students from the University of South Florida were asked as part of a SA+CD design studio to design a housing complex that dealt with the same opportunities and challenges as previously discussed housing project from NYC. After participating of a thorough site investigation in collaboration with the DPU summerLab students were asked to engage with industrialised town of Silvertown. The future development of communities within the Royal Docks, including Silvertown in London, has been the center of speculation for over 5 decades now. The built landscape has commenced to change and generating possible routes of development. Students will focus on delivering socially inclusive housing projects, taking into consideration lessons learned from developments in NYC and closely working with the ‘community’ met during the 2015 summerLab.

Lawrence Raposo

The design integrated two forms of residency including a tower with a central atrium, and two mixed use buildings with retail on the bottom to drive jobs to the area, and residency on top. The proposal included an addition of a College of Botanical Arts, having the school take great care of the site, while furthering their studies and making the entire site a more lively environment due to the great deal of student interaction to the site. With the use of green-markets, communal gardens, the liveliness of a small college, and an exotic botanical garden open to the public, the theory is that the combination of these nodes will ultimately create an inviting environment to all its residents regardless of their class or rank.

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Houman Khosravi

This mix-residential housing project will also host a third housing component, traveling musicians. The traveling musicians will offer lessons to locals in exchange for temporary housing. The exchange between local and travelers will also benefit the community by generating an ongoing series of musical events. A number of supporting retail and communal space will complement the music venues to maximise the energy in the community, shaping a new cultural fabric in the neighborhood.
Yesenia Vega

The Nomad museum would be composed of work from other museums in London and like all museums would have constantly changing exhibits that will continue to bring the residents, the community, and all back to this location. The museum galleries are carved out of the facade of the built up ground, allowing the roof garden to maintain a cool temperature inside of the museum as well as allowing the roof to be habitable for events, gatherings, or personal moments of leisure. The Residential Towers that sit on the North and South end of the site will house social and attainable housing. Each floor contains elevated vertical frontyards with different activities like a playground, a track, pools, or community gardens that will allow neighbours to interact with each other and enjoy the outdoors.

Roberto Rubley

The intent is to create an urban thoroughfare that changes in programmatic function as its directionality moves towards the water of the Royal Docks. Starting before the units, a sprawling hardscape intended for performance and terraced gardening observation, will cater to the public passersby. After passing under the building, a series of whimsical internal courtyards will be offered for the playful residents. As an extension of the public realm, floating glass cubes are ordered in the centre of the lobby’s atrium space. These communal garden spaces will merge the classes. The market rate housing will be situated with views towards the water and the affordable units will be arranged facing the city.
The Aquarium at the Royal Docks is a marine sanctuary that encourages advocacy and educates the public on the basic issues of sustainability that the docks is currently facing and near water bodies. Residents and visitors alike will enjoy the energy created by awareness center. The centre will also attract visitors and tourist to the area, stimulating the economy and much needed jobs in the area. It also contains over 100,000 square feet of leasable, residential and market rate, units that celebrate the scenic views of the area.

Victoria Statzer

My project is based on the idea of an experimental theatre for up and coming performing artists and students to debut their work from the community within the royal docks. Celebrating both local and temporary artists, these informal and semi-formal venues constructed throughout the residential sections of the project are designed to allow a visual and experiential connection between the performers and residents, making their co-existence a vital part of the function of the design.

Sean Fallace

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leveraging the city as a laboratory for developing socially responsive design strategies

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