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

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Introduction

Since its inception in 2010, the DPU summerLab has aimed to question the way in which urban environments are understood and produced, looking at the realities of different urbanisms and leveraging the city as a laboratory to think, learn and experiment socially responsive design strategies. Using design methodologies and engaging directly with local organisations, the immersion in different urban realities allows participants and partners to read and interpret the city, its conflicts, opportunities and spatial realities, and to envision alternative rules of engagement.

In the current urbanised world, every urban context represents a realm in which conflictive narratives take place, materialised and reproduced by everyday socio-spatial practices of different institutions and organisations. The forces and geopolitical dynamics that shape such encounters are given by the complex interlace between local and global practices, influenced by economic flows and needs, technological networks, political pressures and cultural dynamics, which are both shaping and shaped by space and the urban form.

Even if the exercise proposed by the DPU summerLab could find a fertile land in almost any urban reality, the selection of the cities and cases is not trivial. All the locations of the 2016 series, as in previous years, are going through particularly contested processes of urban production, witnessing the tension between different actors in relation to who has control over the production and appropriation of urban space. Conflictive by nature, such appropriations go from the economic and financial control over the surplus produced through urban regeneration, the struggles related to access to land, housing and livelihoods in certain areas of the city, to the cultural practices of the use and symbolic adoption and signification of urban space. Then, in the 2016 series, the DPU summerLab explored four cities through unveiling and interpreting the conflicting narratives and everyday socio-spatial practices of them.

In Beirut, a city with a long history of division and armed conflicts, in which border making practices have shaped the urban realities in uncounted ways, the workshop looked at the riverside, questioning the influence of a potentially natural element on its immediate surroundings; seeing it as an opportunity for the whole city, the workshop investigated the contested nature of the waterscape. The Beirut River is not a simple natural site but a contested landscape. It was seen neither as a neutral space, nor as a pure landscape, as along it there are culturally eclectic neighbourhoods, currently detached from the city and in dire need of upgrading.

Palermo has a strategic role and position within the Mediterranean and European context, particularly in the current context of massive forced displacements triggered by conflicts in both Africa and the Middle East. Then, the workshop centred on mapping out the actual migrant urbanisms in the historical centre of Palermo, while unveiling cases of emergent people-led activities; in so doing, it looked to question to what extent these practices have managed to involve and empower newcomers.

As in Palermo, the main focus of the Barcelona workshop was on immigrants, focusing particularly on a peripheral area of the city (Santa Coloma de Gramenet), and looking at the spatial implications of the co-existence of diverse cultures in the everyday life. Investigating how multiple diasporas use and transform the urban space, the workshop has attempted to unveil the agency of design in triggering opportunities for intercultural integration, feeding the on-going participatory process for the Municipality Action Plan.

London is a megacity that witnesses in a striking and extraordinary scale how real estate market, local authorities and residents struggle to shape the transformation of its different neighbourhoods. In this final workshop, the DPU summerLab worked around the urban redevelopment project Convoys Wharf in Deptford, Lewisham. In the context of this massive project, local residents and community groups have been fiercely fighting for an “opportunity” that will benefit everyone. The workshop worked with these groups in order to collaborate in the process of mobilisation to raise the profile of their community-led heritage projects.

All the above cases represent an immensely rich arena to explore the contested nature of urban space. Talking with locals and key stakeholders, walking, gathering, mapping, drawing, taking pictures, eating, discussing, imagining, proposing, and using the public space and common facilities, the participants collectively undertook the endeavour of experiencing, understanding and envisioning alternative trajectories to the different areas studied. The workshops, on the other hand, landed to the cities as an excuse to overlap agendas, as a space of encounter for sometimes non-conversational voices with interests in the same urban realm. Then, design research is used as a tool to explore, unveil, identify, represent, critique, and re-write the latent potentials of the urbanisms experienced during each of these one-week workshops, and the multiple paths of people encountered.

This publication aims to give space to some reflections emerged during the four DPU summerLab, both from the organisers as from participants, whose voices give account of the different experiences and learning emerged from the workshops. Particularly, we present here a series of dialogues between DPU members and the partners in each of the cities; these dialogues look to explore how the specificities of each case interact with wider urban dynamics and challenges, and how the personal trajectories of the partners as activists, professional and scholars, as well as the paths of local organisations involved on it, are challenged and shaped by the experience and outcomes of the workshops. In presenting these reflections, this publication seeks to contribute to the collective struggles of each of our partners, as well as to wider debates about the role of design in the process of reclaiming, envisioning and raising socially responsive strategies of city production.

by Camillo Boano and Camila Cocina
Beirut: Riverside Ecologies and Contested Waterscapes
in collaboration with
Dalia Chabarek, Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts.

The Beirut River marks the edge of Municipal Beirut. It was once a prosperous river connecting the valleys of the country to the Mediterranean Sea, and promoting a social and ecological existence that resembles a healthy natural habitat. In light of industrialisation, the river stood victim to major changes in the city. The Beirut port, conveniently located near the river, motivated the transformation of neighbourhoods along the waters into industrial zones, inflicting a drastic impact on their pollution.

The river’s concretisation in 1968 as protection from flooding left its waters scarce, exterminated social behaviours along the river, and converted it into an unintentional open-air sewage in the city. More recently, during the garbage crisis of Beirut, the river served as a temporary dump for the entire city. Along the edges of the Beirut River are culturally eclectic neighbourhoods, currently detached from the city and in dire need of upgrading. Urban mobility in these areas are greatly demarcated by the deteriorated and concretised river which prevents natural interconnectedness.

Further isolation is due to the social fabric of these neighbourhoods that accommodate a number of populations in informal, temporary and degraded housing conditions: rural Lebanese in search for employment in the city, generations of Armenians originally fleeing the Armenian massacre in 1922, Kurds from various waves of migration, Palestinian refugees of 1948 and later years, Arab labourers, and more recently Syrian refugees.

Deepening the malnutrition of the neighbourhoods is the consequence of the fifteen-year civil war which put them under the spotlight in heavy battling and destruction. The Beirut summerLab 2016 has questioned the influence of a potentially natural element on its immediate surroundings, and as an opportunity for the whole city. Participants have learned from experts and activists that have been concerned with the river and its environment, and reimagined the river as a naturally flourished corridor in the city. They have performed design research on site, constructed alternative narratives of the River and developed people-centred strategies for its sustainable future. The interventions that came out of the workshop have feed into the work of already existing initiatives to rehabilitate the river and its neighbours.
Beirut: Riverside Ecologies and Contested Waterscapes

A Dialogue Between Camillo Boano and Dalia Chabarek

In a conversation between Dr Camillo Boano and Dalia Chabarek discuss about the third version of the DPU summerLab in Beirut, debating about the main challenges and opportunities encountered, and the potential of the Beirut River as a place for inclusive development.

Camillo Boano: The DPU SummerLab is always a great opportunity to explore and reflect practices of city making, on urban limits and to immerse in the complexity of urban challenges. For me it is always an opportunity to experience the paradoxical encounters between a series of governmental forces, disciplinary knowledge, aesthetic regimes and spatial conditions. This time in Beirut we discovered complex assemblages of forms, materials and politics that contribute to construct and produce, over time and space, Beirut’s present urban condition. This year’s perspective – to reflect on the urban design of Beirut, intended of course not as simple physical dimensions but as design politics – was particularly interesting as we decided to elaborate on riverside ecologies and contested waterscapes, delving and reflecting on the politics of inhabitation around the Beirut River.

Dalia Chabarek: Riverside ecologies and contested waterscapes was a great title that granted us the opportunity to reflect not just on the Beirut River, but rather to open up the dialogue on a citywide scale. Experiencing the Beirut River as a story, as one case study of contested waterscapes in the city, allowed us to envision a glimpse of Beirut’s urban metabolism and practical manifestations within the inter-dependency of a broad range of actors and identities, as well as different timeframes and scales of city making.

To summarize the story, Beirut River was once a flourishing aquatic corridor with a rich ecological habitat connecting the lush valleys of Mount Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea. Along the outskirts of Beirut and adjacent to the river has been home to various identities; Lebanese from rural areas, Armenians from the post-genocide diasporas, Kurds, Palestinian and (more recently) Syrian refugees, Arab and African labourers. The area was regarded ideal to host an industrial zone and the Beirut port, and this severe urban transformation deeply wounded the area’s environmental condition. This led to the disintegration of the river’s ecosystem, as well as its social impact on its users. Further to this, the river was concretized in 1968 in order to protect its surrounding from potential flooding, and it was converted to an unintentional open-air sewage. The total disconnection to the river only fostered the extermination of any social interaction with it.

CB: The story of the Beirut River and its politics were an opportunity to see the urbanization process, at least a part of it where the complex relationships of society and nature transform and reconfigure the process. We were able to witness a large diversity in the mechanisms shaping urban dynamics by a wide array of policies, designs, and management styles alongside forms of cultural production, routine interactions and everyday practices in the different neighborhoods of Badawi and Bourj Hammoud. These dynamics portray fragmentation, seclusion and isolation, and are preventive of interconnected and natural mobility. However it allows for what Edgar Pieterse catalogues as the “rich, complex and indeterminate dynamics of ‘cityness’”: a social fabric of these neighbourhoods that accommodates a number of populations in informal, temporary and degraded housing conditions.

DC: While the river delineates Municipal Beirut, with Badawi on one side of the river integrated in the city and Bourj Hammoud excluded into its own municipality, both sides have an urban morphology that resemble one another to a certain degree. The street life is vibrant with a commercial and vocational economy, they are densely populated, and the architecture is fairly similar, as you have already described. Talking to residents and activists provided us with a deeper knowledge of what the river, or its walls, or the lack of an actual river, stand for. Comparing the current situation to older memories of interaction with nature and interconnectedness with the city helped us better understand the evolution of these neighborhoods. It was a unique exposure...
to the multiple processes, social, spatial, political and material that morphs around identity, character and territory as flowing connectors. In the study area informal micro-economy adjusts and transforms a neighborhood’s spatial arrangement, while mirroring and connecting with the greater Beirut dynamics of real estate, speculations, erasure and fragmentation.

**CB:** In my past visit to Beirut I was not exposed much to this liminal area of the city, although I had a great experience in the Armenian center (Bourj Hammoud). Life was bustling, as always, life in all forms was the kernel of the urban experience. Partially this confirms what I always thought that the city is in a continuous mutation, reassembly, change and transformation, but it exists just because it is inhabited, perceived and lived: its reality is the plot of the different desires, ambitions, hopes and projects it is able to arouse. If the city is not unique, then the knowledge of contemporary urbanisms is not homogeneous as well. The design is not just the made thing, but that the thing further stands as a sign of its making.

**DC:** I always envision this particular area as a melting pot of so many urban processes and forms that Beirut encounters, like it is a microcosm of Beirut. Transportation, waste management, commercialism, industrialization, high-end residences and low-end residences, nature versus manmade, different identities and the creation of a common identity, wellbeing... It has such a rich assemblage of stories to tell, and such a diverse social construct to tell them. It can also allow one to experience its realities just by visiting the place and encountering its many dynamics.

**CB:** It is the perfect example of a city made by people, their agency is palpable in every corner. Beirut is a complex urban reality. However I’m always puzzled by the nature, the force and the dimensions of its urban activism. The perspective of human ecology was a perfect approach to reflect on such environment: bodies, nature and their complex interactions become visible in every moment of the laboratory and tangible in every encounter we made. Institutionally is such a privilege for DPU having the opportunity to partner wish such rich constellation of academics, activists, practitioners and community to challenge the nature and the scope of design.

**DC:** It was impressive to see the immense amount of work that is being done by the
civil society and activists, more so than the government, to protect areas, preserve identities and better the city. We launched the workshop with explorative walk through the urban ecology of Beirut, passing through the different privatized coastal resorts, the reclaimed coast and land owned by a private real-estate development firm, the landfill that caused havoc during Beirut’s two-year long trash crisis, the economic activity that profits from proximity to natural resources, the infrastructural components that shape the city, the port, housing conditions, highways and bus stations. We met with several civil society and activist groups: the OtherDada is working on reviving the Beirut River’s ecosystem and creating linkages between both sides of the river while activating a public social and economic life on its edges; Public Works is telling the stories of neighborhoods in Beirut through the stories of tenants, and one of their sites was Beddawi; The Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche is a collective working on the preservation of one of the last two remaining natural and cultural coastal publicly used sites, currently under threat of real-estate development; Badgeur is a restaurant and cultural center in Bourj Hammoud that is trying to preserve the Armenian culture as well as the engrained culture of the neighbourhood that has recently been marginalized due to lack of infrastructure and development.

CB: Every laboratory is in itself a self-completing outcome. The richness of the area and the wider urban stimuli offered by Beirut urbanity, the competence and the energy of the partners made the rest. Participant’s outcomes were different and all were emerging from the rich narrative of the area, allowing them to experiment and influence with their own sensibility and interests. However, for the first time, we had some creative and artistic outcome and beautiful drawings.

DC: The study area has such a wide complexity in and of itself. Structuring an exploration and intervention in five days is exciting and difficult simultaneously. There was so much to learn, so much which was learned, and so much that still feels like it needed more time. We tried to arrange the week in such a way to provide the participants the opportunity to delve into the neighborhoods, zoom out to look at their relations with the surroundings, and look at a citywide scale and compare with other interesting sites, some of which are also contested. It was very inspiring to meet with local inhabitants as well as activists already working on the study area as well as those working on other areas.

The outcomes of the interventions were quite influenced by the works of existing initiatives in Beirut, but had a youthful, artistic, and technological dimension to them, and across different geographical scales. The site that was presented to them is multi-faceted, and it was difficult to get comparable interventions throughout the workshop. It exposed participants to different opportunities of intervention.

CB: What is next for Summerlab? Beirut is an important laboratory for urban practice and a key area where theories and practices are emerging to inform a global urbanism debate. The current urban refugee situations along with other pressuring elements of the urban nature of Beirut are at the centre of DPU’s partnerships with ALBA, AUB and the multiplicity of urban activist networks and alumni. Some research projects emerged more recently, which made visible the impact of the Summerlab initiative. I’m sure there will be many more occasions to learn the city and to engage with its production and form.
Barcelona: Conflicting Diversities
in collaboration with
Master of International Cooperation Sustainable Emergency Architecture (MICSEA), School of Architecture, UIC, Barcelona

By Zaida Muxí Martínez, Director of Urbanism, Housing and Public Space, Municipality of Santa Coloma de Gramenet

An accelerating influx of immigrants has been shaping contemporary cities in the last decade. The creation of urban strategies for inter-cultural co-existence is imperative. The municipality of Santa Coloma de Gramenet, in the periphery of Barcelona Metropolitan Area, has recently experienced the convergence of newcomers from Latin America, China and the Maghreb region. In this context, the DPU summerLab has explored the spatial implications of the co-existence of diverse cultures in the everyday life of the study area. Such complex reality strengthens the need to acknowledge and assess the intricate relationships between the diverse existing cultures and their use and perception of spaces of civic content.

The week-long engagement of international participants with local residents and public authorities delved into the potentials for intercultural exchanges in the hyper-diverse neighbourhood of Fondo. The driving questions of the workshop were:

a) how do multiple diasporas use and transform urban space? b) how can we map out and interpret socio-spatial interactions and conflicts (or lack thereof)? c) What is the agency of design in triggering opportunities for intercultural integration?

Building on and corroborating existing design-based research, the results of the workshop have fed the on-going participatory process for the Municipality Action Plan.
Barcelona: Conflicting Diversities

A Dialogue Between Catalina Ortiz, Carmen Mendoza and Zaida Muxi

This conversation shows the collective reflections of Dr Catalina Ortiz, Dr Carmen Mendoza and Dr Zaida Muxi, reacting to a series of topics proposed by DPU, in relation to the experience of the Barcelona workshop.

DPU: Could you elaborate on the wider debate you were referring to in relation to the specific study area?

Catalina Ortiz (CO), Carmen Mendoza (CM) and Zaida Muxi (ZM): In the last decade an accelerating influx of immigrants has re-shaped European cities. In this context, the workshop focused on the challenges of ‘urban integration’ of immigrants of diverse cultural backgrounds to the civic life of the Barcelona metropolitan area. We thought that the creation of urban strategies for inter-cultural co-existence was an imperative and embarked in the joint venture of partnering for the workshop with the Municipal Urbanism Department and the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC). The site of inquiry was the municipality of Santa Coloma de Cernogramet that, simultaneously, is the municipality with the lowest income per capita in the region and hosts the largest proportion of diverse migrants in the metropolitan area. We thought that the creation of urban strategies for inter-cultural co-existence was an imperative and embarked in the joint venture of partnering for the workshop with the Municipal Urbanism Department and the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC). The site of inquiry was the municipality of Santa Coloma de Cernogramet that, simultaneously, is the municipality with the lowest income per capita in the region and hosts the largest proportion of diverse migrants in the metropolitan area. Santa Coloma is a compact and dense city that emerged with Spanish migrants in the 60s and has experienced the convergence of newcomers from Latin America, China and the Maghreb region. In particular, we worked on Fondo, a neighbourhood hosting at least 60% of new immigrants, that despite the cultural richness of this enclave, the economic crisis of 2009 triggered an atmosphere of xenophobia that the progressive local government wanted to tackle. In sum, the case allowed us to explore the role of urban design in the politics of recognition and in the cultivation of empathy!

DPU: What were your personal feelings and impressions about the study area?

CO-CM-ZM: Fondo is a hyper-diverse and vibrant area full of potentialities for intercultural exchanges. The premise of our partnership was to build on existing design-based research led by UIC that feed the Municipality Action Plan to work towards developing place-based strategies, rooted in principles of socio-spatial justice. This base line information and the discussions about the priorities of the Urbanism Unit shaped the view of the place. We were interested in delving into processes of socio-spatial integration and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and complexities involved in the development of contested urban spaces. We devised three guiding questions to engage the participants in the municipality on-going concerns about the local economy, the public services and the use of public spaces: a) How do multiple diasporas use and transform urban space? b) How can we map out and interpret socio-spatial interactions and conflicts (or lack thereof)? c) What is the agency of design in triggering opportunities for intercultural integration? These questions enable to navigate the complex reality of the intricate relationships between the diverse existing cultures and their use and perception of spaces of civic content.

DPU: Could you reflect about the main challenges that you encountered in working with local realities?

CO-CM-ZM: The main asset and challenge of the DPU SummerLab format is to address very complex situations in a short period of time with enthusiastic multi-cultural participants of myriad backgrounds. The challenge was to devise urban design strategies at neighbourhood level for tackling ‘inter cultural integration’ with limited time to engage with local inhabitants. In order to enable a learning process we had on day one, our partners and guests gave us a comprehensive overview on the long-term spatial politics that have shaped Barcelona and the contemporary political opportunities and limitations of the new progressive governments in power. Carmen Mendoza presented the evolution of urban schemes of Barcelona, Isabelle Angelovski and Melissa Garcia-Lamarca illustrated the intertwined nature of the migration waves, tourism,
construction industry, gentrification and mortgage crises. On the second day, we visited our case of study and interacted with Santa Coloma de Garmenet local officials that are leading projects about Urban Rehabilitation and Economic development in Fondo. On the third and forth day, participants started the teamwork by brainstorming about how to frame the design challenge in different themes putting at the centre an identity politics and an intersectionality approach. Therefore, the management of expectations was key to keep the work on track.

DPU: What are your reflections on the summerLab’s outcomes, in terms of both process and outputs?

CO-CM-ZM: The DPU SummerLab helped us to think about the spatial implications of the co-existence of diverse cultures in the everyday life of the study area. We devised design strategies to turn Fondo into a unique Multicultural enclave in Barcelona. The three key design challenges identified were: a) Connectivity of dispersed initiatives around the food industry and ethnic food anchored in the gastronomic circuits, b) Suitability of underutilized open and built spaces in and around social housing, c) Reciprocity in the cultural practices in public space. The strategies that emerged to address these issues consisted on: 1. Culinary connectivity: promoted Spatial/informational/institutional linkages to put in the Barcelona map Fondo’s locally grown international gastronomy repertoire as a collective economic asset. 2. Activating inter-generational spaces: focused on women led spaces to steer a collaborative re design of the program and space of un used built and open space to galvanise leisure, non-formal Learning and care among migrant women, children and elderly. 3. Babel tower: depicted Urban games as triggers for intercultural interaction and created a role game tool kit to enhance shared cultural norms about conflicts in public space use. In sum, solidarity networks around food, fun and care were central to foster cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence.

DPU: And finally, do you think the DPU summerLab has had agency on the current urban dynamics? Has the workshop had any impact on the local groups’s agenda?

CO-CM-ZM: The ideas presented by the participants perhaps cannot have a short term implementation but is a work that inspire the Urbanism Department and help to exchange with the different state agencies to open up the possibilities of participatory engagement with the new immigrants.
Palermo: Emergent Migrant Topographies

in collaboration with urbanita and Push, Scuola Politecnica - Università di Palermo.

Palermo has a strategic role within the Mediterranean and European context. It has social and economic relations with the African continent and the Middle-East countries and reminiscence of its history as city conquered and dominated by various cultures, populations and religions, from Phoenicians to Carthaginians, from Romans to Arabs. Its Greek name, ‘Panormos’, can be literally translated as ‘all port’: Palermo has always been a fundamental commercial exchange junction, and acquired strong inter-cultural features which are still present nowadays and strongly identify and characterise it. Its urban historical centre, with its incredible architectural heritage, is suspended in a general sense of decadence, recently exacerbated by the European financial crisis, and the increasing influx of migrants and refugees.

Participants have worked along with urbanita, Push and the University of Palermo mapping out the actual migrant urbanisms in the historical centre of Palermo while unveiling cases of emergent people-led activities – and questioning to what extent these manage to involve and empower newcomers.

By looking at the political, social and economic contexts in which these initiatives unfold, as well as analysing their impact at the urban scale, participants have asked to highlight new tendencies of urban development, their actors and agency. At the same time, engaging with authorities and investors, the DPU summerLab has sought to make the current projects influential at various levels and scales, and to inspire a new enabling framework for similar experiments to unfold.

During the first day participants have engaged in urban explorations in both central and peripheral areas in order to acquire a critical understanding of the urban context as a whole. On the second day, participants have encountered development partners and citizens, uncovering existing spatial narratives, and dynamics amongst several stakeholders.

From the third day on, we had started narrowing down the objective of our urban intervention strategies, while keeping a constant dialogue with local actors and continuing to gather data from the observation of the grounds of investigation. The outcomes of the workshop was presented in a final meeting with summerLab’s partners, local actors and the wider public.
Palermo: Emergent Migrant Topographies

A Dialogue Between Ricardo Martén, Deborah Navarra and Sharon Ambrosio

In this conversation, Ricardo Martén, Deborah Navarra, Sharon Ambrosio discuss about the potentials of the first experience of a summerLab in Palermo, focusing on the challenges related to the dynamics around migration, and the complexities of the city centre.

As part of the DPU’s SummerLab series, “Emergent Migrant Topologies” was our first workshop experience in Palermo, focused on the city’s complex historical and present dynamics around migration. Palermo remains a fundamental commercial exchange junction, with strong inter-cultural features that are still visible—a unique character that has built a strong, if understated, spatial identity. The following edited dialogue reflects on some of the experiences gathered throughout the workshop as well as its operation within a larger urban discussion about Palermo’s identity and aspirations.

Ricardo Martén: When planning the workshop, what exactly drove you to anchor its theme around migration? Given your previous knowledge of the city, there were several possible directions on where to focus the analysis, yet the theme of migrants prevailed as the central entry point.

Deborah Navarra and Sharon Ambrosio: Indeed. We had discussed in advance with the DPU the possibility of developing this SummerLab as an opportunity to look into the migration dynamics going on in Palermo. Given your previous knowledge of the city, there were several possible directions on where to focus the analysis, yet the theme of migrants prevailed as the central entry point.

Ricardo Martén: Although the original idea was to engage migrant groups directly, this strategy somewhat shifted as the planning went ahead, right?

Deborah Navarra and Sharon Ambrosio: Yes, we first wanted to approach, if possible, migrant groups in the city, of which there are several kinds. However, that layer of contact is not as accessible at the moment. Instead, what we found was a strong presence of organised groups, movements and organisations aiding migrants from different perspectives and with different objectives. Given our capacity to access them and include them in the workshop made more sense.

Ricardo Martén: This was also, perhaps, not only more practical but more informative for the participants. If I remember correctly, we met with close to ten different actor groups in three days; some of them overlapping in their interests, but also with different approaches as well. That richness exposed us to an impressive wealth of knowledge, as well as the contradictions that inevitably happen in urban contexts. And given the SummerLab’s short time, talking with experienced local actors was more informative than trying to reach vulnerable groups directly, without the adequate gatekeepers, and liable to potentially risky ethical situations.

Deborah Navarra and Sharon Ambrosio: We thought from the start that getting to know the area of study was the most important part of the workshop. Without a proper understanding of how Palermo’s city centre operates, discussing about migrant groups and responsive initiatives would make little sense. Although the walks were long, I’m sure the participants had a better experience by walking from one actor’s place to the next, crossing through markets and neighbourhoods.

Ricardo Martén: Those three days of constant walking helped us all to materialise and reveal the true pace of downtown Palermo. Whatever pre-conceived notions we all had about the city (and there are many), these explorations naturally corrected. For those of us who had a limited previous knowledge of the city, this immersion bridged the abstraction of migration with the realities of historical legacies, the urban layouts and the architectural forms we discovered.

Deborah Navarra and Sharon Ambrosio: Yes, and while we met with actors in the city, working with people in their current community spaces—in their neighbourhoods—we had a good balance with the academic information we received in the university lectures. I think this helped the participants to acquire a wider knowledge of the full urban context, outside of the just the centre and into Palermo’s geopolitical significance.

Ricardo Martén: How did your previous professional
engagement and activism in Palermo help you build the SummerLab’s general strategy? And, going further, did the workshop contribute in expanding your views and knowledge of the city?

DN and SA: We began our work in Palermo around a year before the workshop, surprised at the city's intensity and also its complicated history. The sight of downtown Palermo was quite revealing, because this is an extremely damaged and ruinous area that is also full with nightlife and history. These extremes were, of course, fascinating, but also suggested real tensions at play—between locals and migrants, between the centre and the periphery, between the past and the future. In any case, what was clear was that Palermo was much more than stories about the Mafia and nothing else.

RM: I went through the same experience, albeit condensed in one week. These constant clashes, at different urban dimensions, made the immersive experience much more surprising. Once you walk in the centre’s four quarters, and distinguish between local Palermitans, other Italians who have settled there, migrants with decades of residence, and those who have just arrived, the urban chaos and vibrancy starts making more sense.

DN and SA: And that is also translated into the variety of groups working there. The local organisations are all very different, but there is a collective sense of engagement that identifies similar problems and challenges. As migration occupies a central stage, it has become a reality everyone deals with, but it is not isolated to other needs the city is facing.

RM: The participants certainly appreciated the wide range of actors, from the very professional, media savvy strategies from PUSH, to the grassroots community engagement of Moltivolti, to the local church’s educational initiatives. And these were just a few. But they added up to introduce all the different layers of activism with migrants, with the urban and with the legacies of the city. It’s a very rich aggregation of dissimilar networks.

DN and SA: One of the most significant outcomes of this experience was to acknowledge the willingness and openness from all these groups. It is normal to expect challenges in terms of access, particularly with critical groups that might prefer less interaction or exposure. That was not the case here. Regardless of specialisation, working style and objectives, Palermo as a whole was incredibly open. This made a great difference and, I think, made a more comprehensive experience for the participants.

RM: The support from the University of Palermo was also remarkable. I appreciated that it was a comprehensive partnering, including lectures, workspace and students as well. Dealing with the local academic side, and the research perspectives they have, is always important, but in this case we had the opportunity to explore and learn together, combining our methodologies in some way.

DN and SA: And we also had the local government representative, who despite our reservations into their specific programs, was willing to talk and respond tough questions about how the Palermo municipality has engaged with migrant communities and how they believe
is a possible way to promote integration and participation in daily life. Again, we might have disagreed with him, but this openness to discuss is rare from Italian politicians.

**RM:** Regarding the actual outcome of the SummerLab, what was your impression about the process and the outputs delivered by the groups at the end of the workshop?

**DN and SA:** To be honest, our main concern was to build a good, solid process, so that the context and reality of Palermo was strong enough to have well-informed, critical foundations. Given the short time and the obvious limitations to process all the information, the final output was a bit of a mystery. However, we were very pleased with the three proposals; they were very grounded, almost feasible if developed further and very respectful of the context. And all had different approaches, which made it more interesting.

**RM:** I think the inclusion of local students in the SummerLab made the outputs much more realistic and measured. They helped to add a local knowledge that complemented what we had seen the previous days, as well as useful information and data that enriched the proposals – maps, pictures, literature, etc.

**DN and SA:** Absolutely. But it was also very telling that even for these students, that have lived in Palermo most of their lives, exploring the city centre and talking with these groups was also a new experience. So yes, I was impressed with the end results: the final presentations were concrete, to the point and not far from the reality, which is what one hopes for at the beginning of the program.

**RM:** So following on that idea, what do you feel was the legacy of the SummerLab in terms of its relevance, particularly in contemporary Palermo? Do you think creating these links between partners and knowledge could help to the larger conversation about the city's urban struggles?

**DN and SA:** I think the main value in terms of the actual workshop was that participants got to see a very different perspective about Palermo. This is a city with many negative connotations, both in Italy and in other countries, so the
chance to see that through urban initiatives and community organisation some positive transformation can happen is very important. And at a larger scale, you can see that the city is trying to reinvent itself, either from these young groups working at the neighbourhood level, to the mayor’s office, who has promoted programs and initiatives to rebuild Palermo’s identity. Just a couple of months ago, Palermo was designated the Italian capital of culture for 2018, which will undoubtedly push interesting initiatives in the following year.

RM: And even if it was a combination of foresight, chance and good luck, these past months after the SummerLab have brought Palermo to the spotlight, somewhat unexpectedly. Its urban regeneration process, in particular, has brought the attention of international media, as well as a renewed interest in the city as a touristic destination. And many of the partners we made are now integral to this larger discussion, which is quite an advantage for any future SummerLabs in Palermo. Being so well connected in this very active environment is an ideal opportunity not only to strengthen the program we followed this last year, but to explore other areas and dig deeper in some of the topics that we covered.
London: Heritage in Transformation
in collaboration with
Stephen Kenny (The Baring Trust)

The London summerLab has focused on Convoys Wharf in Deptford, Lewisham. Buried beneath the Wharf lies the original site of John Evelyn’s once celebrated Sayes Court (and an inspiration for the founding of The National Trust). It was also the location of Charles II’s Lenox, a warship that was built there at the height of the site’s prominence as one of the most important Royal dockyards in the nation, which originally dates back to the reign of Henry VIII in 1500s.

The site now lies derelict, a wasteland waiting for an opportunity to revive it into a prominent riverside destination. In 2014 the go ahead was given to transform the site into a luxury mix-use residential and office development.

While its redevelopment is a welcomed opportunity, local residents and community groups have been fiercely fighting for an ‘opportunity’ that will benefit everyone. When development plans originally ignored the site’s rich industrial heritage, they fought endlessly to ensure that the area’s heritage value is fully instilled into the site’s regeneration plans.

Much has been achieved and participants of the summerLab have learned how the different community groups mobilised and succeeded in raising the profile of their community-led heritage projects. Their fight is far from over, and further work is needed to develop their ideas into concrete, viable plans that can be delivered as part of wider redevelopment scheme.
Stephen Kenny, local partner at the London workshop, reacts to a series of topics and questions prepared by the DPU summerLab team, elaborating on the challenges and outputs of the experience in Deptford.

DPU: Could you elaborate on the wider debate you were referring to, and on why the Deptford area was relevant in such a debate?

Stephen Kenny (SK): The loss of heritage is a major concern in mega cities today; you just have to take a look around London to see how much demolition and construction is taking place at such an accelerated pace, removing the fabric of the London which has given it its global heritage status. The bigger debate – the traditional versus the contemporary and the apparent strive for creative innovation in architecture and construction - is potentially creating the ruination of neighbourhood environments we have grown to love. That's not to say that all redevelopment is responsible for the decay of a liveable environment. And development is inevitable of course.

Heritage enables people to feel proud of where they live. At the local level, heritage, both tangible and intangible are physically and subconsciously part of our lives. When heritage disappears overnight it disrupts the harmony of the environment. The removal of heritage can take people a while to adjust, if ever to this change.

A large percentage of the time, this type of infill planning/development, which removes heritage assets from the environment is rarely replaced with something that brings a sense of belonging and wellbeing. Therefore, people will never accept the new infill at all, and this in turn leads to a sense of despair, unrest, distrust and unhealthy neighbourhoods.

Deptford values the historic fabric it has left. Its naval history emanates from the Royal Dockyard in Deptford. The Neighbouring Borough of Greenwich, further east along river, its historic environment has been declared a world heritage site. The heritage projects – the Lennox and Sayes Court – are really important to local residents. They will actually resurrect a reason for visiting Deptford again.

This is fundamentally important in the sustained success of any redevelopment project; if regeneration is to boast of bringing in economic development, it can only do this if the project creates opportunities for a sustained local economy.

One question that had been raised and left open ended is, given that nature has a way of reclaiming brownfield sites and creating wonderful ecological habitats, and the length of time this site has been left undeveloped with its proximity to the river front, what must be happening at Convoys Wharf for this anomaly to occur? It is strange that few wild flowers and wildlife have reclaimed this site over the last 15 plus years.

DPU: What were the main challenges that you encountered in working with local realities?

SK: The main challenge was having the time to access the wider community to understand their thoughts and perspectives. Over the years many people have felt that comments and voices have not been listened to nor heard, leading to a sense of frustration and disenfranchisement. So many are oblivious to the struggles of the few activists trying to make a difference.

Deptford is lucky to have some very strong local actors who are striving to make a positive difference to the area. It is difficult however to know how representative these voices are of the whole community. My feeling is that when something is left to become an eye-sore, whether deliberately as a means to an end to for a developer to justify their plans, or passively as a result of inertia in formal processes of local development, eventually any change is welcomed, even poor development. The community do not necessarily take the time to investigate the impact of that change. Convoys’s Wharf has been left for so long that development, with or without these heritage projects is probably the answer most will give you.

DPU: What are your reflections on the summerLab’s outcomes, in terms of both process and outputs?

SK: The process of investigating the site from many different scales was invaluable; discovering
the heritage perspective from its surrounding context. If anything, it’s a shame that those days of discovery did not involve more local people. Looking at Convoy’s Wharf site from the River Thames, from Deptford beach and Deptford Creek as well as from the wider context of the neighbourhood, gave a completely different perspective on the site and its purpose. If anything it gave legitimacy to what The Lennox and Sayes Court are trying to achieve. It enhanced the understanding of the site and made it clear what the possibilities of heritage to an area can actually be.

This process is something that all designers of new areas should do, before catapulting into a place and start designing in isolation, as if the site they are developing is an island with no interactions with the wider environment. I believe the participants also found exploring those perspectives useful and this came out in their observations and illustrations. I really enjoyed discussing with the participants their observations; each one, while observing the same environment, came to highlight a different perspective; all perceptions and experiences of a place are equally valid of course. Ultimately that is what intangible heritage is about. Its different stories and memories creating a sense of place.

I think a key valuable outcome was the ideas that participants came up with. In some instances it validated plans that had since been buried by new development proposals. In other cases, it highlighted how vital the surrounding neighbourhood context is to the location of these heritage projects in Deptford; for example, how the high street is actually part of these heritage projects, even though it’s seen as being a distance from the site itself. The participants highlighting this through their small interventions like marking the route to the proposed location of The Lennox and Sayers Court with ‘anchor’ markers.

**DPU: What do you think was the agency of the summerLab on the current urban dynamics? Has the workshop had any impact on the local groups’ agenda?**

**SK:** It’s difficult to say definitively. Of course all conversations and ideas contribute to the ongoing work of local communities. Even if the local community gleaned one or two things from the conversations of the SummerLab, it goes a long way; often it’s not till many months down the line before those ideas are used. I would say however that potentially a short final report would be an invaluable output. It provides the physical evidence to allow the community to put forward as evidence towards their own deliverables, such as the business and neighbourhood plan they need to produce next. This can be something which communities can take and continuously recite to help them with their endeavours, especially when discussing the project with decision-making stakeholders. Such outputs go a long way in giving some weight to local ideas, especially coming from a reputable institution like UCL. Like all conversations, they fade with time; when captured in prose, one day, the right time comes along for someone to do something with it.

Unfortunately saving heritage is becoming a long-term process. The work of communities doesn’t stop. Making a difference at the local level requires ongoing and consistent momentum and resources to keep the enthusiasm and project going. Much like the ebb and flow of the River Thames....
Keyu Tan (Beirut)

Beirut DPU Summer Lab is an exceptional experience for me who had no solid background in urban design and urban development. My view on Beirut and its river changes when I imagine myself switching amongst different roles: a local resident, a Syrian refugee, a business owner, a municipality officer, an urban designer, and an environmental activist. It seems that an urban designer ought to understand all perspectives and to be able to communicate with each group in their own languages.

The difficulties of recovering and developing Beirut river today turns out to be a snapshot of the bigger and long existing problems within Beirut as a city, Lebanon as a country, middle east as a region and even at the level of global complex context. We cannot understand the river without understanding all these related context. It is the physical, social, cultural, political and historical context of an urban area that shapes the problems today and defines the roles and responsibilities of its urban designers. Each urban area has its own context and hence requires different roles for its urban designers.

The complexity, however, also means that the challenge is to find a practical approach, an approach that can be operated with minimized dependency on the existing complicated context at large scale; that can make an impact that may make ripple effects that may last for the long term.

Understand the perspectives of different groups and parties will certainly help. As a citizen, it would also be helpful to understand better the roles of the urban designers and how one could involve and engage with the urban future actively. In some sense, every citizen can be and is an urban designer. As an urban designer, how to bring out the potential of each citizen and how to design and develop WITH and not only FOR them; As a citizen, how to design my own future as a part of a city’s future, are the remaining questions that I will continue search answers for.

Layal Samaha (Beirut)

Knowing that I am a Lebanese citizen who used to always live in Beirut, its River and the nearby areas like Burj Hammoud and Nabaa were for me an ordinary path that I pass through in order to get out of the city to go to the Mountain or to get in. A path like others that we need maybe to travel, forget them and then re-discovering them with a fresh eye. That was the case when I participated to the Lab. It gave me the opportunity and the pleasure to discover the area in a different way. That was possible through the enriching discussions I had with some of the people who live and work there. I won’t forget those people’s face, neither what they said nor the place I met them in, either in the streets, in their shops or in front of their houses. For me, all the people living in this area made and created all over those years this part of the city that I fear its diverse social fabric is not going to be preserved maybe on the long term facing all the obvious changeover happening in other parts of the city and its suburbs.

What was very interesting during the discussions we had my colleagues and I with the people is the obvious dichotomy between the elderly and youth generation memory that they have towards especially the river and its relation to the space they live in. Meaning that, the persons from the old generation remember how the river was and what were the activities practiced at its banks which is not the case of the younger generation. Even if all the people we met consider it in its actual situation as a sewage dump and can’t really imagine it from a different perspective.
There is not only one collective memory of the river and there is a kind of a discontinuity between the past of this river and its present. I take with me the precious discussions and debates I had with the other participants and especially with the organizers of the Lab. And I also take all the interventions of the people from outside the two universities, UCL and ALBA, like Mona Hallak and Public Works, those who are still trying to preserve a part that is left from the history of Beirut.
Niam Abou Chaar (Beirut)

Too many solutions. Not so many interventions.

The collage represents a dystopian vision of Beirut and more specifically the area surrounding Beirut river. The city of Bourj Hammoud has been marginalized by the increased height of the wall on the side of Mar Mikhael. This intervention will generate a social and economical rupture between the two areas. Green spaces invade the city with green lights instead of trees that will automatically generate traffic problems. The collage aims to create a new kind of communication among the citizens of Beirut.
Loricelle Bolido (London)

When first signing up for the DPU SummerLab London Heritage in Transformation, the impression it gave was about place-making and preservation. This workshop for me, however, became about a community fighting to help guide their transformation, to help form their identity while new development is underway. During our observation, we found that Deptford has a multitude of cultures and backgrounds coinciding on the High Street. The community of Deptford, although diverse and varying, was close knit and maintained a sense of pride for the place. They wanted to preserve Deptford's richness, although some did not know how. A majority of the people we spoke with were not aware of the projects that are being planned for by members of their own community. There are amazing projects being formed, but the question we asked was: how can the rest of the community take ownership of these projects? As practitioners, how can we effectively give the tools to the community so they are able to participate in the process? I found that in a workshop that focused on heritage, it was truly about the amazing people that were willing to sacrifice their time to fight to make their neighborhood great for future generations to enjoy. People form the heritage of a place.

Participant works and Reflections in London
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Beirut
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leveraging the city as a laboratory for developing socially responsive design strategies

TRIESTE/KOPER
BORDERLAND HERITAGE
28 AUGUST - 2 SEPTEMBER

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UN-LAYERING IDENTITIES
4-9 SEPTEMBER

JERUSALEM
[INTER]SECTIONS OF URBAN CONFLICTS
10-15 SEPTEMBER

NICOSIA
INHABITING EDGES
18-23 SEPTEMBER

LONDON
CONSTRUCTING HEALTHIER URBANISMS
18-23 SEPTEMBER

The international participation fee for each workshop is £400. The fee is discounted to £300 for: currently enrolled DPU students (2016-17), DPU alumni, and for group applications (5 people or more). Discounted fees apply for participants intending to register to multiple workshops too, please contact us for further info. Please note that these fees do not include travel or accommodation, though advice and local information will be provided. The application deadline for all workshops is Monday 3 July 2017. For more information and to apply please visit www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/programmes/summerlab or write to dpusummerlab@ucl.ac.uk