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Reform!

Essays on the Political Economy of Urban Form

Vol. 4

Edited by
Marc Angélil & Sarah Nichols

The fourth book in the Essays on the Political Economy of Urban Form series looks at the possibility of physical space and its arrangements provoking broader political change. Four essays take Mumbai, Detroit, Diyarbakır, and Tirana as entry points.

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Contents:

WERK 11/ONA: A Laboratory for Contemporary Urban Design and Research

Established in a former factory building as an outpost of the Department of Architecture of ETH Zurich, WERK 11, also known as ONA (Oerlikon Nord Architektur), is a laboratory that brings together a range of disciplines pertaining to contemporary urbanization. It provides open ateliers, workshops, and seminar and lecture spaces joining the ETH professorships of Prof. Alfredo Brillembourg and Prof. Hubert Klumpner, Prof. Kees Christiaanse, Prof. Günther Vogt, Prof. Christophe Girot, Prof. Dr. Christian Schmid, and Prof. Dr. Marc Angélil. As a combination of research center, design studio, and event space, it encourages a dialogue between theory and practice and establishes networks between the academic field and the multiple actors involved in the production of the city. By thinking about architecture, sociology, landscape, and urban design beyond their disciplinary boundaries, Werk 11 hopes to both understand and shape existing and future urban and rural environments, whether in the immediate context of the Swiss agglomeration or in the megacities of the Global South.

Part of WERK 11/ONA, the chair of Prof. Dr. Marc Angélil engages the territorial scale through the tools of architectural research and design with a particular interest in the amorphous, rapidly shifting, and often-overlooked edge zones of capitalist urban development. Current research topics within the chair include informality, food production, and postindustrial urban landscapes.

The chair's lecture series, Urban Mutations on the Edge (UME), situates architectural practice and urban research within the political economy of territorial production. The seminar acts as a platform for making clear, operative links between practice, theory, and research through student-led investigations and lectures from a wide field of invited guests.

The fourth issue in the Essays on the Political Economy of Urban Form series looks at how territorial construction can structure broad political change with a selection of contributions to the UME lecture series by Rahul Mehrotra, Jason Young, Sarah Nichols and Martino Tattara, and Freek Persyn.

Reform!

UME Research: ETH Zurich

Reforming Architecture

An Introduction by Sarah Nichols

Rosa Luxemburg's 1898-1899 critique "Reform or Revolution" laid out the codependence of these two terms as means and end.[1] Reform is the daily practice—the coalitions and democratic instruments—meant to improve everyday life while fostering the consciousness that will eventually lead to revolution.

1 Rosa Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 128-167. Le Corbusier's formulation of "architecture or revolution" is a play on this phrase. Though originating in one of his sly twists of political allegiance, the proposition of considering architecture and reform as analogous remains powerful.

Meanwhile, capitalism—the matter of this reform—is itself evolving through "adaptations" such as credit, cartels, and increasing scales of production that change the nature of the system itself. What Luxemburg refers to as adaptations have since been recognized as the very motor of the capitalist system. In the words of Sighard Neckel, "capitalism has always revolutionized itself. Revolution without change, and change as persistence … these are in fact the paradoxical situations of our times."[2] Capitalism has the capacity to absorb adaptations, up to and including revolutions; with capitalism as the dominant global system, revolution is no longer an exit. Perhaps this is now more salient after the revolutions without change that have been the primary result of the Arab Spring.

Regardless, reform is still often seen as the dour, overlooked sibling of revolution. While revolution connotes a spirited, contrarian energy, reform requires a base acceptance of the institutions of governance. Architecture and urban design also rely on these institutions. This means that avant-garde architecture—in the literal sense of the vanguard, architecture that seeks to be the bleeding edge of larger societal change—must push for changes that also force institutional improvement. Thus, architecture must remain enmeshed in the system and—with patience—press slowly, repeatedly, and in coordination for reform.

What exactly needs reform? The last decades have seen massive shifts in the extents and forms of urbanization. For related professions, this means that the field of action is no longer recognizable. If what is worked on has changed so fundamentally, can working methods stay the same? Some agendas—a need to contend with profit-oriented planning processes, for example—have wide significance as capital arranges,

2 Sighard Neckel, "Response to Luc Boltanski," in *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 73.

discards, and rearranges urbanization. But exact concerns need to be pinpointed at a local level. Despite the ubiquity of globalization's changes to urbanization, its effects still manifest themselves differently.

Reform takes a broad societal agenda instead of being restricted to a professional concern. Its aim is to improve the system from within, rather than merely achieve piecemeal amelioration through small "fixes." The proposition of this volume is to consider the possibility for physical order to foster structural change. As Jean Piaget wrote: "Man can transform himself by transforming the world and can structure himself by constructing structures."[3] Space structures order, with or without consensus. As background, it allows and endures conflict. Politics, on the other hand, reaches a deadlock without majority agreement. Further, modifying physical relations will also ultimately affect social relations and "human practice."[4] The ordering capacity of the city is more often studied from a negative perspective— discourses on spatial justice tend to talk about the production of unjust geographies. But this of course means that the opposite also holds true: if the city is ordered equitably or to produce new potential, it will have a liberating effect on those inhabiting it. This is the possible power of the architectural project.

Modernism began grappling with industrialization's effect on construction and territorial assembly, laying the roots for Team X's "Urban Re-Identification" grid and Josep Lluís Sert's later establishment of urban design as a discipline alongside a broader call that "we must be urban minded."[5] These

3 Jean Piaget quoted in David Harvey, "Population, Resources, and the Ideology of Science," *Economic Geography* 50, no. 3 (July 1974): 267. Harvey notes how similar Piaget's methodology is to Marx's view that the subject is "both structuring and being structured by the object."

4 Ibid.
5 Josep Lluís Sert, "Urban Design," Condensed report of an invitation conference sponsored by Faculty and Alumni Association of Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, April 9-10, 1956. *Progressive Architecture* 37, no. 8 (August 1956): 97-112.

examples from the postwar era show how architecture and planning began opening up to increased social concern and introduced observation as a component of practice. The scale and scope of interest continued to grow as theorists like Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, who were interested in the interplay between space and power, began to influence architectural discourse—thus laying the basis for discussion of the political economy of urban form today.

The first wave of contemporary urban research took place roughly between 1966 and 1973.[6] Several of that era's projects spurred a fascination with reality-as-found, generating an enduring interest in widening architecture's field of engagement and participating in a type of project that found more possibility in the expanding catalog of absurd, real

6 Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas*, Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City*, Manfredo Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia*, and Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* are all urban research works that correspond to this time. The direct lineage of today's research practices in this period can be indexed by the number of studios recently run with the title "Learning From …" or "… Four Ecologies," or as these become passé, "… Within the City."

conditions than in any utopia. Now, a generation of architects is as concerned with researching reality as with mastering building details. From studio education to practice, the profession is attuned to its context of production, even if how to apply this knowledge is not always clear. Researching can induce paralysis. After looking over the horizon of their design schemes, many practitioners have come to the conclusion that their contributions to the city are minimal. Instead, everything—from a project's priorities to the city's growth trajectory—often seems predetermined by economic gain or the next municipal election. Thus, research practice has uncovered the mechanisms producing the contemporary city, but still lacks the means to leverage this awareness into action.

The difficulty architects have in actually building their work is just one reason for the shift from construction to research. Economic downturns have always correlated with theoretical turns

in architecture: if one cannot build structures, one builds a discourse. Slumps have thus allowed the discipline to reflect and reorient, thereby pushing it forward. Two parallel shifts have caused a more structural change in recent decades. First, governmental oversight of project quality has disappeared, leaving developers in control of the process. Although some developers— and governments—rely on the cultural capital of signature architecture, the vast majority work through a streamlined process in which careful design would only interfere with the bottom line. Second, knowledge production has become increasingly important for the economy. Research as consultation or for publication is now desirable and marketable. Universities and left-leaning governments who invest in innovation and knowledge have opened the possibility of supporting an office through analysis instead of building. Thus, a turn towards research is not only a turn away from construction, but also a way for architects to offer new skills in the post-Fordist economy.

Architecture seeking to better address urbanization at large needs to change the way it operates. Certainly, the profession should continue to grapple with the largely external conditions of how urbanization is created. But this would be far more potent when coupled with an intradisciplinary discussion on methodology and aims. These topics have become largely taboo with the fragmentation of architecture into subcategories; one almost needs to look back to Walter Gropius's era at the Bauhaus to find a broad culture of discussion on method. Strategies should be researched in parallel with conditions. At same time, concerns about urbanization discussed within the discipline could be better communicated to a general audience. Raising these topics would foster public concern for the city's arrangements. If an engaged public

can be reached, then architects and urbanists can (and should) also play a role in advocating for value being placed on social and political factors instead of just profit.

This is the fourth volume in the Essays on the Political Economy of Urban Form series. *Reform!* focuses on how the city is made and, in doing so, suggests possible alternative forms of practice. The title can also be read as "Re: Form," or "Regarding Form," a conjecture for a path forward. Rather than policy, platforms, or other partial actions targeted at ameliorating specific conditions, form implies a totality of thought aimed at producing or modifying comprehensively. The book is structured to address the theme with increasing precision, moving from the broad context in which the city is produced to specific proposals for negotiating building details as the outsider expert. Together, the arguments presented will open a debate on how and why our construction of cities, norms, and

professional concerns could be reformed.

Rahul Mehrotra's essay walks through key moments in the planning history of Mumbai in order to lay bare the mechanisms at work in the production of many cities today. In tracing the shift from strategies that frame development by defining the public realm to the weak, developer-driven determination of floor area ratios, the analysis makes clear how architecture's role has become more constrained through changes in planning. In short, his contribution makes the case for the necessity of reform within urbanism. Jason Young looks out from Detroit to urbanization in general and proposes a radical break: urbanism cannot continue upholding the city as its ideal form, for in doing so it cannot account for so many of the territorial configurations that urbanization produces. Intervening anywhere within that field requires the development of new tools: not merely design strategies, but also a vocabulary for the varied

conditions found, including research methods that can simultaneously engage at the scale of design intervention and at the larger scale of the production of meaning and territory. A contribution written by Martino Tattara together with myself reflects on a project to establish a municipal housing authority in Diyarbakır, Turkey. By focusing on public housing as not just a form of development, but also a form of welfare for its inhabitants and an ordering agent for the city, the essay offers a critique of widespread, development-minded housing programs that, together with infrastructure, define the building program of many states today. The final essay by Freek Persyn distills lessons from the ten-year process of building the TID Tower project in Tirana, Albania. Through a series of specific prescriptions for how to work through a project as a team, he challenges the still-idealized role of the architect as individual artist by proving not just the necessity of but also the

productive potential in giving up heroism and embracing collaboration.

Architecture and urbanism, like reform, are slow processes that are inevitably tangled up in larger institutional machines. For architecture to consider reform also requires that it remain engaged with mechanisms that are much larger than the discipline itself, finding ways to act on and influence them. Making complex processes visible is the necessary basis for prescribing action. This volume thus critically examines the contemporary production of urbanization. It further discusses the development of necessary methods and tools—sometimes directly, and sometimes latently, analogous to Donald Rumsfeld's "known knowns," "known unknowns," and "unknown unknowns."[7] Some of these methods are understood and articulated as they have been tested and

7 Donald H. Rumsfeld, "DOD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and General Myers," (news briefing, United States Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., February 12, 2002), http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636.

are being described. But a cross-reading of the book will also uncover implied or possible methods, things described by the author but not yet articulated as such, that could act as propositions for further investigation. For architecture, observation and action are reflexive: insight into how urbanization develops should form new methods, while new ways of working should also change how we observe urbanization.
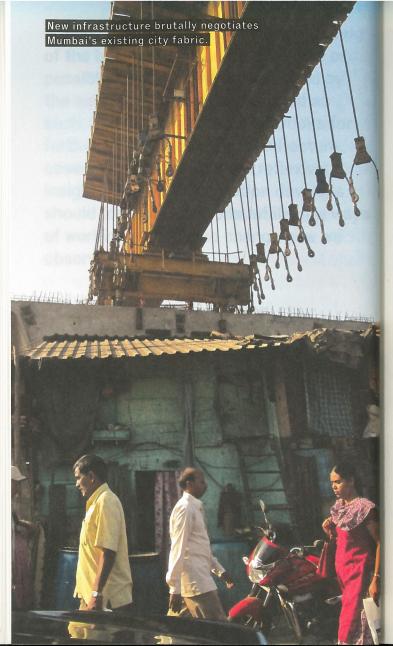
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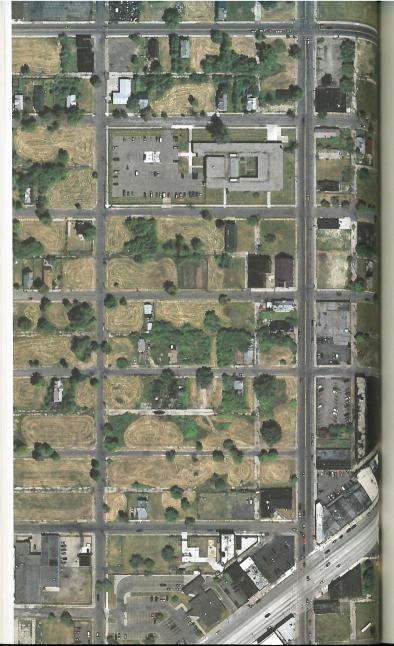
New infrastructure brutally negotiates Mumbai's existing city fabric.

Evolution, Involution, and Mumbai's Emergent Urban Form

By Rahul Mehrotra

In Mumbai today, laissez-faire growth is combining with large-scale infrastructure development to morph into a peculiar urban landscape that is clearly not the result of a discernable strategy or vision for the city, but rather th de facto result of a series of incremental tactics played out independently by the public and private sectors. These tactics range from the creation of self-help housin (informal settlements or slums), to the redevelopment of post-industrial landscapes, to the creation of infra-structure such as roads and flyovers—each driven by their own specific needs and aspirations but without any articulation of how it all would add up to make the city a better-functioning entity. In this situation, the planning authorities have shifted their roles from visionaries and administrators of the city to contracting, executing, and crisis-managing bodies.

This restricted focus on the existing fabric of the city as a territory for planning coincides with a shift to rearguard actions, which contrast with the avant-garde actions that have traditionally defined the profession. The last avant-garde vision to be enacted was New
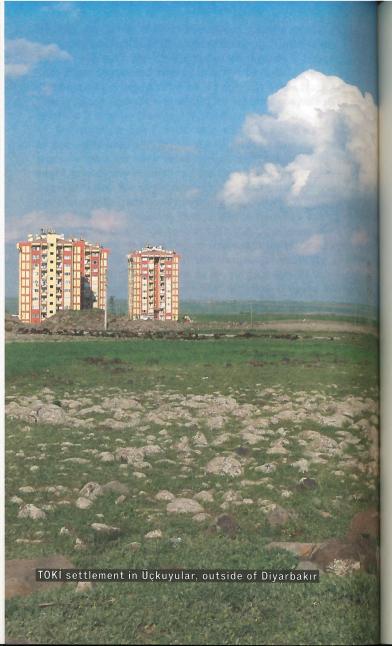
Letting Go of the City

By
Jason Young

Arguably, the city is the most celebrated and academically cherished formal and spatial configuration of urbanism. Sustained exploration of the material conditions within post-industrial cities such as Detroit, however, places a dilemma in the path of urban study. One can uphold the propriety of the city and the individual disciplines that labor to make sense of it; or one can *let go of the city* in favor of urbanism itself, placing "proper" disciplinary conclusions at risk while exploring the myriad spatial configurations produced by the processes of urbanization that persist outside of the canonic territory of the city. To embrace urbanism and explore its post-city affinities is not to abandon the city, nor announce its demise, but to recognize that the terms "urbanism" and "city" are often conflated in a manner no longer consistent with contemporary forms of urbanism or city form. Letting go of the city has as its shadowy correlate the letting go of disciplinary control over the immanent wildness of urban subject matter.

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* is a useful place to start the process of disentangling the terms "city" and "urbanism," given that he puts forward a definition of urbanism that has not, in advance, conflated it with the city. This conflation is far more prevalent in reflections on urbanism emanating from planning and design disciplines. In the book's chapter

TOKİ settlement in Üçkuyular, outside of Diyarbakır

From Shelter to Subsistence

By Sarah Nichols and Martino Tattara

A project to set up a municipal program for housing the displaced population in Diyarbakır, Turkey was conducted over two years through the Berlage Institute.[1] It aimed to create a local alternative to the state housing program (TOKİ) and, in many ways, an alternative to how public housing is typically conceived.[2] Influencing our approach were discussions about scarcity, a concept that is again slowly crossing from economics into architectural debate. Housing was thought of not as a form of shelter, but as a form of subsistence. Opening up the definition of municipal housing to include socioeconomic conditions expanded the aim and potential impact of

1 The project titled *Accommodating the Displaced: A New Municipal Housing Service in Diyarbakır* was developed between February 2010 and June 2012 as collaboration between the Berlage Institute Rotterdam, the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies Rotterdam (IHS), the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, and the Diyarbakır Development Centre Association. The project was initiated by the Berlage Institute together with Diyarbakır mayor Osman Baydemir and Çağlayan Ayhan-Day (who later acted as project coordinator) during 2009.
2 TOKİ stands for the Prime Ministry Housing Development Administration of Turkey. See: http://www.toki.gov.tr.

The TID Tower is covered by a total of 1,984 standardized panels combined with cast-on-site floor plates, which are uniquely shaped per level.

Building a Tower, and an Attitude

By Freek Persyn

In 2004, we won our first major competition: the TID Tower, a mixed-use complex in Tirana, the capital of Albania. We were all around thirty years old and still busy setting up our own office, 51N4E. However unlikely it was to win the competition, it seemed even more unlikely to find ourselves working in Albania, a country whose beauty was not evident the moment we arrived.

The context, the city, and the client turned out to be a good match, probably because we were all in exactly the same situation. Full of ambition, we lacked the skills and the experience to realize our dreams and, as a consequence, we were all grabbing every opportunity to experiment and test out parts of them. Like us, then-mayor Edi Rama was trying to leapfrog his way into the future, bypassing the unfeasible to focus on things that might make a difference. It was his "invention" to match local developers with international architects; it was our task, together with the developer, to make this invention work.

After ten years of slowly building the tower, we now see how much we have learned from stepping into the process inexperienced and unskilled. Looking back, we can recognize what we have done as the development of

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