

SMASHING UP THE FURNITURE: Adventures in activist architecture

HUGO MOLINE



1.

The practices of architecture, planning and design, through the formal production of space, have forever been used to reinforce the interests of the economically and politically powerful. As the work of architects literally makes concrete the desires of those with the means to buy, build and hire, we are simultaneously building out all those who do not. We measure out space, detailing precisely what goes where, who gets what, uncritically making physical the social and economic divisions of the society in which we build. So for all the developments in aesthetics and technology, we move the city nowhere, we change

nothing, stuck in a game of endlessly rearranging the furniture, making noise but changing nothing.

But from Bangkok to Rotterdam, from Brooklyn to Redfern, innovative, alternative practices are emerging. There are architects who have chosen to smash up the furniture and invite local people to help make something better from the pieces. These practices have rejected the old mercenary paradigm, of reinforcing the spatial will of the few who can pay, and by doing so have regained their own independence and the power to change the way our cities are produced.

Crucially these new practices seek out collaborations with the people who actually use



2.



3.



4.



5.

OPPOSITE: IMAGE 1. La Mona (the Doll), or Tijuana III Millenium, a 17 metre high sculpture built by Armando Muñoz Garcia in his backyard in Colonia Aeropuerto as a tribute to his city on the occasion of Tijuana's first centenary in 1989. **ABOVE: IMAGE 2.** Illustration by ETC of the process by which the Mecalux frames can be delivered and appropriated by the people to make secure housing in Tijuana's informal settlements. **IMAGE 3.** A new pathway in Ayutthaya built by the people themselves leads to other spontaneous improvements. **IMAGE 4.** Two shopkeepers from Samchuk market performing in the music video. **IMAGE 5.** The underbridge squatters discuss their plans (left) then build them in front of the Housing Authority (right). **IMAGE 6.** One of CUP's teaching tools, participants use the pieces on the left to construct a map of housing affordability for different occupations and income brackets, making visible the socio-economic divisions in housing and what uncovering what housing assistance programs they may have access to. **IMAGE 7.** Members of the CTU in Punto Fijo spend Saturday morning collectively tiling one of their new houses.



6.



7.

the places they design. They join with community organisations, activist groups and people in the street to pursue interests outside of the existing power structure. They use architecture as a vehicle to explore and expose entrenched socio-spatial injustice and to create concrete alternatives. They continue to learn and innovate, becoming ever more rigorous, open and effective. These practices are as diverse as the highly specific geo-political contexts in which they work. CASE Studio of Thailand, Estudio Teddy Cruz of the San Diego/Tijuana Border region, the WiMBY! Hoogvliet project of Rotterdam, the Center for Urban Pedagogy in Brooklyn, Park Fiction and the Collective Production of Desires in Hamburg, the Permanent Workshop for Participatory Design in Caracas and the global network of Slum/Shack

Dwellers International represent just a few of the diverse approaches to reinventing the way we make our cities.

CASE Studio: Open questions and sideways tactics

The *Community Architects for Shelter and Environment (CASE)* are a group of young Thai architects based in Min Buri, an outlying suburb of Bangkok. Working in different constellations for over 10 years, CASE began as a small team working out of a garage providing architectural advocacy to communities living in the underserved and excluded informal settlements growing across Thailand. Over the years CASE has collaborated with underbridge squatters, communities facing eviction, canal-side settlers, itinerant building labourers and

The connection between abandoned buildings and homeless people



A project by Ms. Malary's Ecology Class at the Heritage School in cooperation with the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)

Where do abandoned buildings come from?
Why do people lose their homes?
What should be done to fix these problems?

A postcard advertising one of CUP's High School collaborations which became a vehicle for wider debate on the issues of urban planning.



Diagram by Estudio Teddy Cruz explaining Casa Familiar's proposal for a new social architecture in Living Rooms on the Border.

many other groups on how to collectively improve their situation. CASE differs from many architects who do similar work in the depth and creativity of their approach to participatory design. In their work they are continuously striving to question and reveal the situation of the communities in which they work and to create accurate representations of these communities' visions for change. In their work they have assembled an impressively subtle and versatile practice and philosophy which, through a combination of flexibility, tireless questioning and a cunning indirectness, provides guidance in the often murky territory of participatory design and community engagement.

The CASE architects initiate open conversation with communities in crisis in order to collectively uncover the reality of their situation. They ask questions, start a discussion, often leading to understandings and responses which neither the community nor the architects could have predicted at the beginning. Accordingly the products of these collaborations are often surprising and fall outside the traditional boundaries of architecture. Their projects to date have included: a house made of biscuit tins, a concrete pathway which stopped a destructive new road, a music video which united a community and a full-scale model village built as a protest and publicity stunt – as well as a wide range of housing, infrastructure and livelihood projects. These artifacts, though richly worked and highly successful, are, for CASE, secondary to the real goal of the work: to bring people together, to expose conflicts and open up contradictions, to increase people's understanding of their own situation, and to connect them more strongly to their place and each other, increasing their potential for collective action to make positive change.

CASE aims to get maximum impact from minimal gesture. During the mass evictions of Bangkok's underbridge squatters, CASE hosted a collaborative workshop in which the squatters could set down their proposals for an equitable, people-led resettlement. After ten weeks of collective questioning and design activities in the workshop, the participants built full scale models of the resulting housing designs in bamboo and fabric on the steps of the government's housing authority. CASE organised a popular music festival to accompany the building of the spontaneous settlement. The action generated a great deal of publicity for the squatters and demonstrated their capacity to determine their own future. The housing authority was left with little option but to support and assist the construction of a permanent, serviced resettlement.

Flexibility and opportunism are also crucial to CASE's work. When they arrived in Ayutthaya to work on another resettlement design, this time for a group being evicted to make way for a new road, they found a community solidly opposed to being 'resettled'. Rather than pushing ahead with the planned design workshop they began meeting with the community to determine what else they could do together. The boggy central access way was an item of common concern. Without the funding (which had been dependent on complying with the eviction) CASE proposed a model where every family contributed labour and chipped in for materials in

order to construct a new path. The people did it and were so taken with the result that they began other upgrading works, painting their houses, planting new gardens and paving communal areas. The city officials were impressed by the spontaneous renovation and plans for the new road were shelved.

Community is a highly idealised concept, but the realities of conflict and entrenched local politics require CASE to approach some situations in radically imaginative ways. The once thriving riverside Samchuk markets were decaying and unpopular. When CASE attempted to start a community design process on how best to revive the markets they found a group of merchants deeply divided by old feuds and dominated by a strict hierarchy. Fortunately they also found a young musician living in Samchuk who had written a song about the place. Rather than getting bogged down in local politics or allowing the established heavyweights to dominate the conversation the CASE team changed tack completely and produced a music video for the Samchuk song. They filmed the disparate community members lip-syncing to the words, then edited the footage, placing those in conflict side by side. When the people saw the video they began to see their differences fade. Those in conflict began to speak, those without a voice found confidence and the process of working on the market could really begin.

Estudio Teddy Cruz: Critical proposals for the borderlands.

The role of architecture in exploring and exposing the politics of space is also key to the work of Estudio Teddy Cruz, a research-based architecture studio located in the borderland of San Diego/Tijuana. From this site of conflict he instigates projects which reveal, critique and suggest alternatives to discriminatory spatial practices from uneven global border flows to biased neighbourhood zoning laws.

Through these projects new building typologies are invented, new financial and political relationships are created, new tactics for subverting existing regulations and institutions are explored. Where others see problems Cruz finds opportunities. How can the exploitative labour practices of global corporations in post North American Free Trade Agreement Tijuana be used to support housing for the workers they rely on? How can the massive influx of Latin Americans into San Diego be harnessed to reinvent stultifying Anglo-American suburbia?

San Ysidro, the neighbourhood at the world's busiest border crossing and home to many of the Latin American immigrants who have settled in San Diego, is the site for *Living Rooms at the Border*, an affordable housing collaboration with Casa Familiar, a local, non-profit social service provider.

The typically suburban environment of San Ysidro has been progressively changing through its appropriation by successive immigrants. Unofficial house extensions have densified the area and brought life to back alleys. Informal garage industries and businesses have created livelier, mixed use streets. Drawing from these phenomena Cruz and Casa Familiar have created a new kind of housing

project, one which interweaves multiple social and economic programs while opening up specifically ambiguous spaces for people to appropriate and make their own. In doing so the project challenges those planning regulations which are antithetical to the creation of affordable housing and functional, living neighbourhoods.

Where the regulations only allow three units, the project proposes a mixed village of twelve: Where the regulations only allow housing the project weaves together five complementary uses. Cruz proposes that density needs to be redefined not as the number of units per acre, but rather as the number of social and economic exchanges per acre (such density is allowed by tactics like sharing kitchens between households, an arrangement not uncommon in the area). The housing is complemented by a social centre, offices for Casa Familiar, a park and a community garden. The central pedestrian street through the project is flanked by a series of semi enclosed spaces. These spaces, below the housing, adjacent to the park and loaded with connections to water and electricity, are designed to be taken over and re-imagined, perhaps used as market stalls, an informal kindergarten, a workshop, cubby house or a place to sit and play dominos.

In a smaller project, also in San Ysidro, Cruz and Casa Familiar combine the mutually supportive programs of aged housing and child care, also a common existing pattern within the community where older residents often care for their grandchildren while the parents are at work. It is hoped that both projects will act as catalysts to confront, expose and change the planning regulations. Already the San Diego City Council is trialing a system of Affordable Housing Overlay Zones, which offer exemptions for sites being developed for affordable housing.

Through their projects Cruz and Casa are also combating the affordable housing financing system which, due to a catch 22 with planning regulations, are actually preventing any affordable housing from being developed in San Ysidro. The problem is that projects must have more than fifty units to be eligible for government loans and subsidies, however projects with more than fifty units are expressly forbidden by local planning regulations. Cruz and Casa propose a model where fifty individual households collectively receive the funds to be split up into numerous projects, perhaps five smaller developments or even fifty backyard granny-flats, providing density and income. These loans could be paid back at least partially through sweat equity, becoming labourers in the construction process or contributing hours to the communities social services.

Over the border Tijuana has seen the arrival of a very different kind of border-crosser, the *maquiladoras*, assembly plants for multinational corporations such as Hyundai, Sony and Walmart. After the NAFTA the *maquiladoras* were set up in Tijuana, as in all Mexican border cities, to take advantage of Mexico's low wages and lax labour laws while remaining close to their customers in the USA. The workers for the *maquiladoras* live in the improvised, unserved and precarious settlements on the mesa.

Among the *maquiladoras*, Cruz identified Mecalux, a manufacturer of modular industrial shelving. Using their components, Cruz has designed a structural system which he proposes could be donated by the *maquiladora* to its workers, ensuring structural soundness while leaving all decision of spatial configuration and cladding to the occupant/builder.

Perhaps Cruz's greatest strength is his highly tactical approach. The project exposes and explores the enormous exploitation at play in the *maquiladora* industry while simultaneously providing the *maquiladoras* with a readily achievable way to begin to redeem themselves. He never simply presents a critique; it is always folded into a detailed and realistic solution.

Cruz's projects have a polemic value uncommon in architecture. Another project, *McMansion Retrofitted*, critiques the new wave of highly wasteful and inward-looking suburban housing by projecting their future reappropriation by immigrants. Cruz conducted interviews with Latino immigrants, including his Guatemalan mother, inside various "model homes". The suggestions which emerged from these interviews became the basis for a series of proposals for how a how a single family home could be altered to house three families and a variety of rotating social and economic programs.

WiMBY Hoogvliet: Who's living in those old concrete blocks? Neighbourhood research and nexus for collaboration.

The practice of architecture for Cruz becomes an opportunity to analyse, critique and intervene in the particular context of the Borderland, exposing its conflicts and attempting to harness its enormous creative potential. Through his projects he is able to address very local and specific issues while as revealing global and universal concerns: of borders, migration, exploitation and inequality. In a similar way the *WiMBY! (Welcome into My Back Yard!)* *Hoogvliet* project takes the much maligned post-war social housing suburb of Hoogvliet in Rotterdam as a very specific context to learn from and engage with. The project began when the Crimson Architectural Historians and Felix Rottenberg saw an opportunity in the planned restructuring of Hoogvliet in 2001 to provide an independent platform for research and community collaboration to develop concrete projects for Hoogvliet's future. *WiMBY!* set up physically in Hoogvliet and began to organise events, workshops, and projects to explore the present situation in Hoogvliet and generate proposals on how things could change.

Over its six years of activity in Hoogvliet, *WiMBY!* has produced a diverse array of proposals, activities and built work. Projects have included new school buildings, a single mother's housing workshop, the redesign of post-war housing for youth, a guesthouse for politicians and journalists to visit and learn about Hoogvliet, co-housing for musicians or people who grow vegetables, a project to bring wildlife and the tides back to the dikes and a Hoogvliet public themepark complete with make-your-own party villa, open air cinema, swimming lake and hobby huts.

WiMBY! has functioned as a kind of linking mechanism between people in the community with unfulfilled needs for housing or public space (young people, single mothers, anti-social musicians, schoolchildren, immigrants from Surinam etc) and the designers, architects, ecologists, politicians and journalists who could help to help to develop the solutions.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy: Educational tools to understand the city and how to change it.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), based in Brooklyn, also acts as a hinge between underserved communities and designers who can assist them. For CUP the practice of effecting change in cities is less about the design of buildings to the design of educational tools, ways for people to understand and navigate the physical, social, political and economic systems in which urban life operates. By facilitating collaborations between a diverse range of actors CUP has produced 'teaching tools' ranging from a two metre long interactive fabric graph to help people understand the complexities of housing affordability, income brackets and available support programs to a map of cargo routes to assist the coordination of striking dock workers and "*What's up with Public Housing, a Guide to Participation*", a community produced TV show using skits, animation and documentary to spread awareness of how residents could impact the decisions on how public housing funds are spent.

A large part of CUP's work takes place in inner city high schools. Taking the "City as a Classroom" concept, resident teaching artists guide the students through intensive six-month investigations on subjects as diverse as what happens to the city's garbage, the demographics of incarceration and the links between vacant buildings and homelessness in New York City. These projects, while enabling young people to engage in the issues of the city, also often reach far beyond the classroom, with works featuring in exhibitions, festivals, the media, and even turning into teaching tools in their own right.

Park Fiction and the Collective Production of Desires: DIY urbanism, make your own plan.

These emerging tactics are not the privileged domain of architects alone. Community groups are also independently adopting design as a powerful tool for securing their interests in their city. *Park Fiction*, a loose collective of engaged citizens in Hamburg's red-light district of St Pauli, were faced with the impending "redevelopment" of their local park by politicians and real estate speculators eager to capitalise on its central location and harbour views. Rather than following the traditional path of protest, Park Fiction launched their own parallel planning process, the *Collective Production of Desires*. The group set up a shipping-container office in the park (consisting of a modeling-clay office, a garden library, an archive of desires and a 24-hour hotline for contributing ideas). They also developed a portable planning-studio-in-a-suitcase for visits to surrounding suburbs. Through the community planning process that followed Park Fiction has been able to secure the park for continued use by local residents and has been able to find financing and construct many of the collected "Desires" including an artificial palm oasis, a flying carpet lawn, a boules field and three open-air solariums.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), based in Brooklyn, also acts as a hinge between underserved communities and designers who can assist them. For CUP the practice of effecting change in cities is less about the design of buildings to the design of educational tools, ways for people to understand and navigate the physical, social, political and economic systems in which urban life operates.

Los Comités de Tierra Urbana and the Permanent Workshop on Participative design: Securing land tenure and Auto-diagnosis for new modes of living.

Opportunities for architects to involve themselves in these kinds of projects are increasing worldwide as previously marginalised communities become more organised, experienced and determined in claiming their rights to the city. In Venezuela *los Comités de Tierra Urbana* (Urban Land Committees, or CTUs) are self-organising federations of families living in the *barrios*, those sectors of the city built by residents themselves without official recognition or provision of services which house over half of the country's population. These CTUs, with assistance from the government, gain collective ownership of the land they occupy, an essential step to facilitating the incremental upgrading of these often precarious settlements.

The *Taller Permanente de Diseño Participativo* (Permanent Workshop on Participative Design) is a team of architects, mostly drawn from the Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela, who provide the technical support for the CTUs. They provide assistance in upgrading roads, houses and basic services, and in the design of *Campamentos de Pioneros*, new settlements built and owned collectively. The main role of the Workshop is to ask questions and assist a process of *Auto-Diagnosis*, in which it is the people themselves who analyse their situation, their needs and desires. What is the slope of the land? How many grandchildren does Yexi have? How many hairdressers do we need? Where will we play dominoes? How will we treat wastewater? Why do we have to struggle when others have it so easy? The process does not restrict itself to planning; everything is up for discussion, resulting in a stronger, more informed community ready to fight for their plan and better their own situation.

Slum/Shack Dwellers International: Globalisation from below.

Where government support structures are lacking, community based organisations are tapping into global support and experience sharing networks to assist in their development. *Slum/Shack Dwellers International* (SDI) is a federation of local, mostly women led, movements organised around micro-savings and housing rights. With its roots in India the federation now includes affiliates in 29 countries across the Global South from Honduras to Malawi and Timor Leste. SDI affiliates, such as the Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines, have appropriated professional planning methods to create maps and statistics of their undocumented homes, the first step in making them visible. In a true example of globalisation-from-below SDI facilitates exchanges between members to learn from one another. Participants travel from Nairobi to Colombo to discuss strategies to fight eviction, or from Payatas to Dili to assist the setting up of new savings groups. Although the most important exchanges are between members, the federations also make use of a wide range of professionals, engineers and architects, in the upgrading and construction of housing and services. In fact the majority of CASE Studio's projects have in fact been initiated by members of the Thai federation, without whose organisational support the projects would certainly have been impossible.

Working outside the interests of Capital and bureaucracy is not easy. Finding funding and support for such projects is a creative challenge in

itself. CASE has set up a construction company to subsidise their community projects, while Estudio Teddy Cruz works out of his university office and relies heavily on philanthropy, and others patch together cultural grants, micro-finance and government funding in order to continue their work. The federations of SDI are particularly amazing in this regard, often building projects solely on the time, labour and small savings of its members, most of whom live below the poverty line.

Taking back the city.

These are still small movements, brief moments of resistance, peripheral happenings. But they are slowly, surely changing the way people see their city, not as a mute, generally oppressive background, but as a malleable object, a responsive environment, and potentially the physical manifestation of our lives and desires. Through their diverse work all these groups are demonstrating that through organisation, ingenuity and collective action it is possible to change our built landscape, that no matter who we are, the city is ours.



Hugo Moline is a designer, researcher and founder of the Milkcrate Unlimited -people's architecture workshop- an architectural open space for collaboration which works on projects of affordable housing and public space in Sydney's West. He has previously worked with the Homeless People's Federation of the Philippines and has spent the last two years visiting, investigating and working with CASE studio, Estudio Teddy Cruz, the Center for Urban Pedagogy and los Comités de Tierra Urbana as part of an international research project with support from the Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship and the Dunlop Asia Fellowship.

LINKS:

CASE STUDIO:

<http://www.casestudio.info/2006/index.html>

ESTUDIO TEDDY CRUZ:

<http://www.politicaequator.org/>

WIMBY HOOGVLIET:

<http://www.wimby.nl/index.php>

THE CENTER FOR URBAN PEDAGOGY:

<http://www.anothercupdevelopment.org/>

PARK FICTION:

<http://www.peprav.net/tool/spip.php?article51>

LOS COMITÉS DE TIERRA URBANA:

hugo@informalism.net for texts and contacts

SHACK/SLUM DWELLERS INTERNATIONAL:

<http://www.sdinet.co.za>