

# TURNING THE TABLES

LINDSAY BUSH, AN ARCHITECT AND RESEARCHER FROM DURBAN, WAS THE LOCAL COORDINATOR FOR URBANXCHANGER CAPE TOWN.

It sounded like a long shot, at first. Perched on a kitchen counter in a guest house in Cuba, clutching a landline to my ear while a thunderstorm raged outside, I listened as Marcos painstakingly described what they had in mind. It will never work, I thought: too complex, too many actors, not enough time or money. I also cast doubts upon the ability of urban practitioners, particularly architects, to negotiate such an open brief, and on the likely lack of interest we would face from the community initiatives that had entered the Award in each city, to partake in a project with no explicit monetary reward – times

are hard down South. I was also suspicious of the culture of foreign architects parachuting in to solve our problems for us, and rather fiercely protective over the people and projects with which I had developed strong bonds over the years. There was however something hugely appealing about the urbanxchanger proposal – so open, so much potential, so many possible outcomes - and I thought back to all those times as a civil servant when I was told: ‘that will never work’ and they were, invariably, wrong. Maybe this time I was wrong too?

As the local coordinator for Cape Town, my efforts were concentrat-

ed on the identification of actors and the facilitation of relationships and processes. A ‘gentle role’, it consisted mostly of observation and documentation – nudging behaviours, highlighting common ground, capturing moments. Most insightful, I believe, were the following conversations noted during the Cape Town workshop week, which give a rich snapshot of the genesis of the primary project output, the Tafelhuis or Table House:

What a house IS vs what a house DOES in people’s lives? Is this a state of permanent temporality or temporary permanence? What will the repercussions be of acting outside the law (by building the prototype without permission)? Will the City come and bulldoze it down? Could it cause reputational damage for those involved? Might it cause jealousy or problems with the neighbours? What constitutes a successful approach in an environment where it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission? Is it to act collectively as a stimulus, an irritant? There was much discussion around a different way of looking at housing production: What can we learn from the way of building informal settlements in South & Central America – multi-storey concrete frame & brick infill compared to the less sophisticated tin and wooden shacks found in South

Africa? How can we move away from the Fordist, top-down separation of labour, and closer towards the Volvo ‘One-car system’ which offers pride, accountability and an opportunity to see the fruit of one’s labour? How can housing production become a training opportunity during which participants pass on skills to others? Is the prototype structure a composition of small elements (eg. block & beam technology) or a more sophisticated shuttering system such as an in-situ concrete slab? Could we limit the scale of the intervention eg. to hand-held tools only? And lastly, what is the potential for replicability at different scales eg. Micro (the House) – Midi (the Neighbourhood) – Macro (the National Housing Programme)?

Only once all teams had regrouped for the last time in Berlin to present their work, was it possible to grasp the richness and diversity of the explorations and interventions that had resulted. Urbanxchanger unveiled new modes of collaboration: true co-creation, allowed to evolve naturally without the constraints of a necessary deliverable. While this prompted a lot of questioning, it also gave the space for the projects to evolve organically in response to different needs and contexts. It gave teams an opportunity to work in ways – and with

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people – that might not ordinarily be possible, to test ideas, reexamine and possibly redefine one's own role as an architect, urban practitioner or social entrepreneur. The process also shed light on the limitations of traditional education and practice, which does not necessarily equip us with the tools to negotiate the complexity of today's cities.

There were several overall 'learnings' from the project, of which two stood out for me. The first was the limitation of time. Working with communities that had evolved incrementally over many years, a focused intervention in such a short time felt out of place, like a 6-year project wearing a 6-month corset. The other 'learning' was a deeply personal one. Having often visited and worked with the community where the first Tafelhuis client lived, I thought I knew the situation there quite well, yet was ill-prepared for the close-up view. I found myself repeatedly shocked at the volatility of a life lived in poverty and constantly reflecting

back to my own life, lived just on the other side of Table Mountain but a whole world apart. As built environment professionals, we rely on planning – we are taught how to dream and how to convert those dreams into something tangible – but as a shack-dweller in the Cape Flats, you simply cannot plan as you have no idea what the near future holds. Next week you may not have enough money to put bread on the table for your family, you may not have a table because your dwelling has burnt to the ground, and you may not have a child because she was caught in gang crossfire walking home from school. This volatility reared its head many times during our short process but every time the team adjusted, recalibrated and forged on. Their perseverance demonstrated that when these two worlds come together, regardless of differences and constraints and despite (or maybe partly because of) less than ideal situations, very special things can happen.

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