

# AN URBAN EXCHANGE: NEW FORMS OF COLLABORATION IN CITIES

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VIEWS

## CO-DESIGNING CITIES

'Co', as a prefix, indicates partnership or equality. It refers to something made jointly, together, and with mutual relevance. Co-design refers to the making of cities collectively. A city is the result of a collective effort poured into the making of its spaces, so the question we would like to focus on here is *how* those acts of making are carried out.

In acknowledging the fact that cities are the result of the collective, there lies great potential for change in the way that they are currently constructed. But for change to take place, there is a need for designers to understand the complexity of the cultural and

societal scenarios they encounter in their work, and for community initiatives to grasp the potential of trained designers to contribute to better and more acceptable living conditions.

In an effort to forge new forms of collaboration in cities, urbanxchanger was created to approximate architecture from what we refer to as an informal intelligence. In this newspaper we show this process through the collaboration between designers, or urban practitioners, and local community initiatives in four cities: São Paulo, Mexico City, Cape Town and New Delhi.

## AN URBAN EXCHANGE

A team of urban practitioners from each of the four cities was paired up with a team of urban practitioners from Berlin. The resulting four teams were each introduced to a local community initiative selected from the shortlist of the Deutsche Bank Urban Age Awards. The teams were composed to deliberately encourage an 'urban exchange' between the different parties involved.

Community initiatives with a strong impact on, and interest in, the built environment were chosen for the project. Additionally, we looked for initiatives whose work was linked to macro structures in the greater metropolitan area, despite their projects being focused on improving urban spaces at a local level. Our selection criteria was supported by the following rationale: while urbanxchanger acknowledges the fragility of isolated action—due to its local character—the programme also analyses the mechanisms used to bring about change, and looks at how those same mechanisms could be applied on a larger scale.

That thinking led to four distinct scenarios: the urban gardens beneath the electrical lines in São Matheus, São Paulo; the community spaces along the city borders of Miravalle, Mexico City; the self-

built spaces found on 'the edge' of the slum in Sangam Vihar, New Delhi; the 'upcycling of people' through skills training, being used to address the housing crisis in the Cape Flats, Cape Town.

After long-distance discussions, the groups met for the first time in each of the four respective cities, where they were introduced to the local community initiatives through in-depth, custom-designed workshops. The workshops included site visits, urban walks, multidisciplinary discussions, informal conversations, and participatory design sessions with local residents. Throughout the project, the teams and communities worked with curators and local coordinators, who were key actors in mediating the process due to their previous work with the selected community initiatives.

## THE GOALS OF AN OPEN PROCESS

Intentionally, we did not ask for the teams to necessarily build anything, but rather to listen and to learn from each other on the ground. They were asked to test collaborative modes of action with the community and to develop a local, process-oriented approach to dealing with the challenges faced by each of the initiatives, thus reimagining the relationship between community initiatives, urban practitioners

and the city. In each case, the process was guided by the active participation and negotiation of all parties involved on the ground.

Coming from different cities, the teams were called on to use their different perspectives to reflect on if and how, urban knowledge and social intelligence from one city could be transferred to the sociocultural fabric of another city. It was deemed vital that this exchange of knowledge and sharing of experiences be mutually relevant and beneficial. Community initiatives should be able to exchange experiences and benefit from shared ideas in order to assist each other in overcoming the challenges that they face.

In the process of coming up with solutions, the teams were encouraged to examine the status quo of built environment design, to consider the notion of shared responsibility for the built environment, and to address the social, political, economic and environmental impact of their actions. In all cases, the proposed solutions were tested or implemented in the urban environment.

#### REFLECTION

Later, the teams met in Berlin, a city considered by some to be a centre for contemporary urban innovation. Here, the urban practitioners were able to share

their work and findings and reflect on their processes, based on feedback from the other teams as well as on the contact with Berlin-based community initiatives. This phase of urbanxchanger involved critical reflection on the experimental practices that had been developed in the four partner cities. A critique of the methodological approaches used was undertaken, along with an analysis of the tools generated through the working process and an interrogation of the transfer of knowledge gained from the experience.

#### FOUR NARRATIVES

The four practices presented in this newspaper reveal alternative approaches to conventional planning. The knowledge they produced is related to the social and processual aspects of space, and could prove to be of great use to communities, designers and governments.

Based on the urbanxchanger experience, we suggest that the field of urban studies can be enhanced by incorporating local ways of doing things. This line of thinking points to a necessary review of the current instruments available for intervention. It suggests a shift from the design of the architectural object, to a design capable of articulating the complexities involved in urban

spaces—the means of production in cities, as well as how spaces are used, appropriated and experienced. These acts of spatial transformation stress the role of the ‘makers’ and ways of ‘place-making’ that result from a constellation of social relations weaving together at a particular locus. The process of reflecting on and critiquing the urbanxchanger experience generated critical knowledge in two main areas: it raised questions and guided adjustments to the practices that developed in the four cities, and it showed how the experiences and the knowledge gained might be transferable to the city of Berlin. This highlights the different levels of collaboration involved in the urbanxchanger project. It is not simply about the South learning from the North, or the other way around, or about architects, designers or urban practitioners learning from community initiatives, or vice versa. More importantly, the process stresses the discourse of the ‘co-’ as a possibility at a global level and focuses on the much-discussed ‘nature of participation’ through the lens of design, methodologies, tools and techniques.

At the core of the urbanxchanger project is the concept of co-design: collaborating *with* the users—accepted as experts on their own environments—rather

than designing *for* them. The approach is also about postulating the impact and the role of architecture and design as disciplines that should engage with the status quo and contribute to shaping adequate urban environments. It’s about finding the potential for change by engaging with the challenges posed by the inhabitants’ everyday lives. It’s about joining political forces in order to empower residents to transform their own realities through a hands-on approach and with the resources available to them. Lastly, it’s about channeling different perspectives into a singular innovative direction in order to co-design possible futures: together, mutually and jointly.

‘Co-designing cities: architecture and informal intelligence’ refers to a collaborative approach with regards to architecture, urban planning and the design and management of public spaces, one which capitalises on the assets of local communities. The research process presented here identifies opportunities and develops alternative instruments to intervene in the construction of collective space.