

Beyond Inert Sites—Scoping the Urban Landscape: Re-calibrating Architectural Narratives and Practices Through the Shaping of New Urban Knowledge in Architectural Education

The traditional architecture project as assigned in architecture schools, is typically situated within a prescribed and fixed inert site with finite given programs. This lies somewhat in opposition to the pressing issues currently facing the contemporary North American city, if one looks at the prevailing urban contexts within which many North American schools of architecture are situated.

INTRODUCTION

Through the immediate urban lens, these charged urban contexts might be challenged with issues of: vacancies and terrains vagues, post-industrial landscapes and shrinking cities, as well as the contestations by different urban actors for the “Right to the City” as described by Henri Lefebvre in his seminal text by the same name.¹ Further, is the need to address the increasing impacts of climate change, framed within the context of the anthropocene, particularly in cities located in coastal locations, as well as the Great Lakes Region. Here the architectural project must re-imagine new land-water interface, as well as new forms of human inhabitation at the intersection of ecologies and infrastructures. Here new typological responses over the one-off architectural project are critical. These prevailing contexts of the urban provoke a critical re-thinking of the proverbial architecture project and its fixed and, arguably, arbitrary boundaries, or architecture as object, necessitating a shift in architectural education.

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Figure 1 (above): Ecological Study, *Reclaim Reuse Recycle Remediate La Chaudière Falls and Victoria Islands: Transforming a Formal Industrial Site into an Important Cultural Landscape* Ecological Mary Alvarez and Jessica Djaha Meta, Architecture/Urban Design Studio Fall 2013

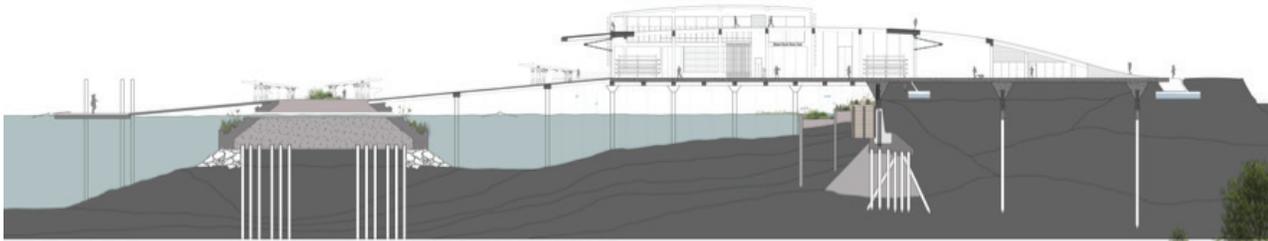
Figure 2 (left): Speculative Proposal, *Reclaim Reuse Recycle Remediate La Chaudière Falls and Victoria Islands: Transforming a Formal Industrial Site into an Important Cultural Landscape* Mary Alvarez and Jessica Djaha Meta, Architecture/Urban Design Studio Fall 2013

the singular inert site, with its conventional and fixed architectural programs, in favor of more open-ended hybrid programs, or new notions of site across scales as shaped by new urban knowledge(s). The site and city beyond can be understood across scales. Subsequently, the shaping of new urban knowledge garnered from design research is crucial in order to design within and for it. It seems appropriate that architecture, as have other sub-design disciplines of the built environment, might critically reflect if there are more flexible and dynamic methods of working beyond fixed sites and engaging the city and its systems and ecologies. Additionally, this might include acquiring new urban knowledges from the city, which might be cultivated in feedback loops into the architectural scale of programming, or new notions of site. In urban design, for example, landscape and ecology as urbanism has been posited by such theorists as Charles Waldheim as a more appropriate medium for designing within the North American city.² Additionally, practitioners such as James Corner in “Landscape as Agents of Creativity”³, discusses how the processes of ecology and creativity can work as agents of change, while advocating that a simultaneous working between the two serves as a useful and alternative design model. Whereas urban design and planning was once a subset of the architectural discipline in the middle of the 20th century, it is arguably somewhat of a North American phenomena that architectural education remains, arguably, divorced from the mechanisms of city planning and implementation at the city scale beyond that of the conceptual. This schism between architecture and urban planning is manifested in North American architecture schools where architectural design and planning are separated by discipline, or if they are housed in the same school, their relationships are divorced or in disciplinary conflict. This separation and fragmentation in the actual profession is largely attributed to the backlash against the Modernist Urban project, as influenced by the Congrès internationaux d’architecture moderne (CIAM), or International Congresses of Modern Architecture Charter. Founded in Europe, CIAM made its way to North America in a mutated form with North American characteristics. These modern urban projects emerged in post-war planning and which included: urban renewal; rationalization through segregated Euclidean Zoning, as well as highway construction enabled by the Federal Government’s 1958 Highway Act. This was divisive in perpetuating the so-called “white flight” to the suburbs, and the emptying out the cities. Community backlash lobbied against this top-down planning, advocating for more participatory models of city design and planning. This led to city design and planning becoming more based in policy and the social sciences, without the integration of design. In contrast, in emerging developing countries in Asia and notably China, planning students have two years of architecture design training and the profession is based on physical planning.⁴ This paper posits a framework and methodology where architectural education goes beyond the object, becoming more integrated and responsive to the conditions of urbanism. Here architectural projects might be more integrative within the forces of the city.

This would translate to architecture students being educated to further hone their skills in being lateral and strategic in their thinking and designs, as well as more critically engaged in more integrative approaches within the urban context and scales of the city. These architectural responses are more flexible and dynamic, and which engage indeterminacy and open-endedness. This leads to a fundamental questioning of teaching with fixed and assigned programs and static assumptions. Similarly, in an inversion, the architecture project might re-position itself, where it considers itself beyond the scale of its inert site, engaging different notions of site, with the potential of being a catalyst within the larger scale of the city and both its ecological as well as infrastructural systems.



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SHAPING NEW URBAN KNOWLEDGE IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

This paper discusses the integration and shaping of new urban knowledge in architectural education, with the methodology and concept of “scoping the urban landscape”. This strategy of scoping is instructive and well positioned to re-calibrate architectural narrative and practices through the shaping of new urban knowledge. I will examine these concepts through a series of architectural design projects explored in both graduate architecture studios, as well as a graduate design research seminar. These projects re-integrate the architectural with the greater scales of the city, operating at the intersection of architecture, urbanism and ecological systems. The shaping of urban knowledge has the potential to catalyze more significant generators in the architectural project. Questioning fixed and assigned conventional programs and assumptions, in addition to generating new ways of envisioning and iterating hybrid programs. At the same time, the urban scale of design might engage appropriate architectural methods of representation, such as collage, montage, superimposition and bricolage. This has the potential to move beyond simple architectural responses, to the scales of new hybrid programs and informed typologies.

Figure 3+4 (above): Speculative Proposal for a Boathouse on Lake Erie, Buffalo, *Between Architecture and Landscape at the Water's Edge*

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SCOPING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

The concept of “scoping” suggests an “extent or range of view and outlook often privileged with a visual apparatus”.⁵ When used as an operation within the discipline of architecture, it might also imply a strategy of going to the extents or to the perceived boundary (ies) of an established range of views within the discipline. The projects discussed here were given sites with a series of conditions that required a landscape recovery, and which do so engaging the “site” at different scales. Scoping is useful in the discussion of designing for a post-industrial landscape waterfront location within the cities of study. With its complexities, here scoping might also serve as pushing the boundaries of the discipline of architecture at the periphery, and then returning with new urban knowledge that informs and recalibrates the architectural narratives and practices. This paper and the design projects discussed in it, posit that a “scoping” from the peripherals and then bringing back a broader knowledge base in architecture as shaped by urban knowledge, is instructive to then work from at the immediate and informed new paradigms and frameworks.

METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS OF REPRESENTATION

The projects discussed in this paper move beyond more conventional modes of addressing the architecture project as an inert site with given fixed programs to shaping urban knowledge of the city beyond. This includes the interdisciplinary borrowings of methods and modes of representation, including the questioning of cultural biases in representation of land-water edge condition such as articulated and explored through by Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha in *Soak and Mississippi Floods*.⁶ Students were introduced to different methods of graphic inquiry, in addition to appropriating or borrowing urban design methods of representation in the design arena, including mapping and GIS and landscape/topographical and territorial mapping. These challenged conventional methods and modes of representation, while addressing contemporary North American city issues. Students were challenged, through research, garner new urban knowledge, which might situate new ways of thinking and designing the architectural project. Students have also been challenged to question conventional ways of seeing, as well as challenge conventional methods and modes of representation. This has included both a borrowing from methods of representation from urban design and landscape, where engaging flux and change over time, including the process of mapping which enables new methods of envisioning and graphic modes of inquiry. These can better address North American contexts such as vacancies and formerly urban sites, site and context. I posit that the skills that architecture students must develop are those of critical thinking, with more integrative approaches to urbanism with flexible design responses. The practice of mapping has the agency of revealing new ways of seeing, as well as the juxtaposition of new relationships across scales of interventions, which might operate, as catalysts and as a paradigmatic shift. Also discussed, was the notion of both public space, within the context of the North American City and the reclaiming of or right to the city. This included the choreographing of the constituents, stakeholders and urban actors in new spatial practices. Architectural narratives and practices might be recalibrated through the shaping of new urban knowledge in architectural education.

HYBRID DESIGN PROPOSALS

These projects move beyond inert sites, engaging programmatic frameworks, which address larger issues of programs. While students were given a project framework and brief, they were also required, however, to develop their own programs for the site. These were based on their understandings of it related to different scales of the city, from the initial beginning design process. Thus, they created their own architectural narrative. Project programs engaged the process and new forms of urban knowledge and questions fixed sites and assigned programs. Students developed more lateral thinking in somewhat more open-ended design projects, underlying the questions of post-industrial site in need of landscape recovery.

In addition to developing their own architectural narratives, through the shaping of new urban knowledge, the students were also introduced to the processes of shaping design within the larger city. This included presenting to the various constituents, stakeholders and urban actors. In the design studio, this was earlier on in the design process, which enabled students to integrate comments and issues, sometimes in conflict, into their final spatial project proposals, in addition to developing their own architectural narratives. In all of these projects, the site is not in fact fixed. Through different design processes working across scales, and through the garnering of new urban knowledge, is transformative in seeing new possibilities. The architect, like the urban designer, can champion or act as an advocate for shaping of the public realm, and the choreographing of the various urban actors and their struggle for the right to the city. They can engage the urban for its multiple fields, as well as spatial and territorial organizations, overlapping scales and temporalities. These projects engage real issues of the North American city in which they are working, namely the post-industrial landscape and waterfront, the “shrinking city” with its vacancies, terrains vagues and formerly urban and industrial uses and a possible landscape recovery. Here, the traditional European centric city is not an appropriate spatial model or urban precedent. We cannot assume these spatial contexts. These are layered and medieval urban fabrics, having evolved over time and not of the same fabric as that of the post war North American cities that have been impacted by issues such as urban renewal or have even incrementally evolved over time, impacted by sprawl and Drosscapes.⁷ Alternative modes of process and concepts are required in new frameworks informed by new urban knowledge. These include concepts of palimpsest, layered meanings, multiple understandings of site, infrastructure, and disruptions, new typologies that challenge responses and ways of seeing and design become critical to address as methods of design. Processes of landscape become recalibrated with new architectural typologies. New agencies and hybrid programs, appropriate the tools of representation for urban design and landscape, at the same time as borrowing architectural methods of representation for urban inquiry. This includes moving across scales, to create new architectural narratives, thus revealing a site’s palimpsest, layering and relationships to ecological and economic, fluid relationships between architecture and site. Appropriate boundaries and multiple scales as well as different forms of urban knowledge and how to construct narrative are questioned. The projects shown here engage in the processes of the site and larger city, fundamentally questioning conventional programs and responses to site.

RE-CALIBRATING ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVES AND PRACTICES

Reclaim Reuse Recycle Remediate La Chaudière Falls and Victoria Islands: Transforming a Formal Industrial Site Into an Important Cultural Landscape

This graduate architecture studio engaged in the strategic design and landscape recovery for a post-industrial site. The studio’s design charge was framed as an embodiment of the issues facing the contemporary discipline of architecture, engaging a number of the technological, social and environmental changes happening in the world within the emerging post-industrial landscape. The initial pre-design process moved across scales of the site, working at the peripheral, which can include working across disciplines and new expanded scales. In an operation referred to as scoping, the design process which informed and re-emerged at a new and informed knowledge base with newly re-calibrated architectural narratives and practices for the designs of these sites, the design research and process for a post-industrial site.

Located on a politically, culturally and environmentally complex 45-acre post-industrial site in Ottawa, Canada, the site’s previous life as a pulp and paper mill industrial complex had been recently decommissioned. Specificities of the site, including a hydroelectric power for the mills from the naturally occurring Falls has created a historically multi-layered site with multiple meanings, as well as being geographically and politically charged.⁸ Public discourse has included questioning how best to develop the site, issues of architectural preservation of

buildings and artifacts, possible landscape recovery and how the site should and can define a new cultural landscape. Issues of how to respond to the historic spiritual and sacred meaning of the site for the First Nations Peoples has also been a lens with which to examine the site. Working through the initial design research, students worked at the scale of discovering the site's palimpsest, in addition to working with new architectural representations, which could show a simultaneous juxtaposition across a timeline of these mappings of the changing of the site. This included beginning from its natural condition as a sacred site for the First Nations people, to its industrialization and the transformation of its landscape through industry and its subsequent decommission where in some cases nature is returning back to it. Similar to the architectural operations of collage and juxtaposition, the insertion of architectural narrative into the layering and synthesis of a final baseline map returns architectural operations at the center, creating new and layered meanings for the site, as well as the possibilities for hybrid programs. Working within the discipline of architecture, initial design research informing the design projects worked as a "scoping" at the periphery, across scales. This also included a moving between different disciplines through architectural inquiry, moving beyond architecture's disciplinary boundaries into those of infrastructure, landscape, ecology and ethnography. When re-emerging as the architectural project, new architectural narratives and notions of site(s) were shaped by new knowledge garnered by forays into the urban. Had this scoping not occurred and, en lieu, a set of static given programs been part of the design and iterative processes of the design project, the project might have inevitably remained at a defacto development strategies endemic to development strategies for such sites. The studio also served as a speculative design proposal that challenged the current scheme proposed by developers acquiring the charged site, which included a defacto conventional narrative of condos and its parcelization and rationalization as private property under Euclidean zoning. Student's speculative alternative schemes were presented to the media as well as to key government officials with the federal government National Capital Commission charged with the overseeing of the future of the site. Media coverage also put these alternative proposals into the public imagination.⁹ Alternative methods of architectural inquiry and modes of representation included the introduction of notions of palimpsest, as well as mapping flux or change over time, hydrological systems and changing land-water sectional interfaces. These explorations led to the creation of new hybrid programs derived from these multi-scalar. Concepts of de-urbanization, as well as landscape recovery, were also examined as possible alternative spatial strategies and practices. While issues of temporality and ephemerality have dominated architectural discourse, these have done so at a certain level of conceptual abstraction. In these projects, multi-scalar studies employing an almost McHargian layering of basemaps and GIS layers informed design strategies, as well as manifesting themselves in the spatial project.¹⁰ Mapping included creating taxonomy of the actual ecological materials and habitats of the site, as well as researching how the industrialization and entropic qualities of the site through the changes it experienced as catalyzed by the creation of a power ring dam that had actually negatively impacted the natural habitat. The creation and insertion of these architectural narratives were instrumental in developing certain alternative conceptual design frameworks. These included the softening of oppositional relationships between the building, land and landscape, as well as the integration of nature at the intersection of human habitation. Further, was the subsequent recovery of the landscape by the integration of these as overarching conceptual frameworks. One design scheme, through its research on the antiquated hundred-year old power ring dam on the site, proposed dismantling the power dam and introducing a more contemporary dam which allowed the natural habitat to return and aspects of the site to return back to their natural condition, thus restoring the natural falls, the initial sacred site for the First Nations people. Design reviews included the multiple urban actors engaged in the ongoing negotiations of the site, somewhat in conflict with one another, including the Federal governmental agency

charged with it, as well as representatives from the First Nations people who still have a claim to it and have the legal power to enact Land Treaties. Further, the design schemes, which emerged, engaged with revisiting the Treaty obligations of the government with the first Nations People. The design research moved beyond a simple landscape recovery of a post-industrial site, to the creation of new hybrid programs, putting into perspective a fundamental paradigm shift in the thinking of its development and the return back to its original landscape and relationships between nature and culture. A strategy of de-urbanization also became a concept, in addition to designing with the flux of the contestations of constituents and the stakeholders. More instructive design processes and research methodologies for dealing with the complexities of designing both in our current urban contexts, which include complex sites must, in fact, begin with design research and process within an expanded field working across scales of the urban located beyond the perceived periphery of architectural operations. This process of “scoping” includes working across design disciplines and scales. It proposes that, while working at once at the periphery, the design process can emerge and re-emerge informed and shaped by new urban knowledges. It further suggests that the discipline of architecture is poised to address this multi-scalar process of working peripherally in design and research. Concurrently, architectural narratives which have been recalibrated as a result of this peripheral operation beyond inert sites at which architecture is adept at creating. Working between the peripheral and the base within the contemporary discipline of architecture becomes a critical component of the iterative design process. This framework engages notions of flux and change over time. Additionally, students might engage in design considering creative planning mechanisms such as re-zoning and leveraging, land swaps, landscape recovery and healing through de-urbanization, as well as working across disciplinary boundaries.

BUFFALO’S WATERFRONT AS AN URBAN CATALYST

A graduate architecture studio for a boathouse on the city of Buffalo’s post-industrial waterfront, operates not only in isolation from the perspective of an inert site, but rather imagines the grounds for acting as a catalyst within the larger contexts of the city’s urban forces such as a post-industrial. The design process is imbued with working beyond inert sites, begins with an initial scoping of the urban landscape. These include layered and cultural meanings, which recalibrate new architectural narratives. Urban knowledge is garnered through initial research and different methods of representation. These can act as catalysts for larger contexts, and not simply as generators for architecture as a static object, yet can also operate across scales. Acting as agents of change for the city, as well as landscape recovery. By scoping the site’s historical palimpsest, and the shaping of diverse historical, social and ecological forces, the architectural project fundamentally questions the existing land-water edge condition and conventional assumptions of site. The design itself operates across scales, at once sited but acting as an urban catalyst, generating attitudes towards the integration of passive design systems; design recovers part of the ecological landscape, integrating habitat and landscape, the form generated by new urban knowledge. The project is a scaled response, which critiques, in part, the existing hard seawall edge. The scheme proposes softening this edge, thus allowing and providing a substrate in the architectural proposal as well as typological interventions for new habitat. With the advent of the Snow Wall occurring in Buffalo, prompted by extreme climate change experienced by in the Fall 2014, Buffalo, the design also created new typologies which respond to increasing changes in the land-water edge as instigate by climate change, an increasing reality, while creating new programs along the waterfront. main body text goes here.

ENDNOTES

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Right to the City, Writings on Cities*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 1996,
2. Charles Waldheim, "Landscape Urbanism: A Genealogy", Charles Waldheim, *Praxis Journal of Writing+Building, Landscapes Issue 4*, 2002, pp 10–17
3. James Corner, "Landscape as Agents of Creativity", in G. Thompson and F. Steiner, eds, *Ecological Design and Planning*, New York: John Wiley and Sons.
4. This based on empirical observation from the author's numerous architecture and urban design studio collaborations led in collaboration with Schools of Architecture and Urban Planning in China, including Tianjin University for the studio, "Designing an Alternative Form of Development for the Tianjin Eco-city through Landscape and Ecology as Urbanism", Spring 2011.
5. Merriam-Webster dictionary definition
6. Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha in Soak and Mississippi Floods critique representations of the land-water edge condition through plan as opposed to sectional representations.
7. Drosscapes, as articulated by Alan Berger is "an urban design framework that looks at urbanized regions as the waste product of defunct economic and industrial processes and supposes a use of 'waste landscapes' within urbanized regions", from *Drosscapes*, Alan Berger, 2007, Princeton Architectural Press.
8. The speculation for development on the Chaudière Islands was originally researched written about in an article by the author for Canadian Architect-Logjammed-Negotiations are underway to conserve and transform parts of a former industrial site into an important cultural landscape within the centre of the National Capital region, published January 2007.<https://www.canadianarchitect.com/features/logjammed/>
9. Studio project was described in an article by the Ottawa Citizen, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/florida-architecture-students-sketch-visions-for-domtar-lands>, article by Elizabeth Payne, *The Ottawa Citizen*, published on January 4, 2014
10. Method of determining the intrinsic nature of a site through layering transparencies of different systems of the site through superimposition as described by Ian McHarg in *Design With Nature*, John Wiley and Sons, 1995 and supposes a use of 'waste landscapes' within urbanized regions", from *Drosscapes*, Alan Berger, 2007, Princeton Architectural Press.
11. The Ecological Practices Graduate Research group is currently one of four graduate research groups at the University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning which "critically engages environmental systems, and examines the role that architecture and urbanism play in harnessing and stewarding them.", from UB Ba+p webpage.

RECOVERING BUFFALO'S POST-INDUSTRIAL WATERFRONT E

Finally, in an advanced architecture graduate seminar housed in the Ecological Practices Research Group,¹¹ students discussed seminal texts engaging with the themes of urban ecologies and ecological practices. These included Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and *A Concrete Atlantis*. Framed through their readings, students were assigned a site at the intersection of a series of conditions occurring along Buffalo's post-industrial waterfront. At the intersection of these conditions, Ecological-Hydrological and Infrastructural conditions, students were asked to propose an architectural intervention at one scale. While the project framework critiqued the failed Modernist Urban Design and renewal project executed in Buffalo, it at the same time encouraged students to work with the fragments of the legacies and dystopias of the previous Modernist Urban Design project. Students explored new methods of describing and representing Buffalo's urban landscape and its latent ecologies, through new methods of representation of the site, ground and land/water edge context. They did so through mappings and the creation of hybrid drawings and constructs, as well as cartographic narratives. Such concepts of site palimpsest, indeterminacy, agency, flux and change over time as they considered the site across scales. This so-called scoping of the urban landscape, succeeded in impacting, as well as generating new ways of urban knowledge and approaches to architecture. Additionally, it elaborated and included new methods of representation, traditionally employed at the architectural scale, and translated to a scalar understanding of urban and ecological systems. This scheme proposed an intervention which attached itself to the underside of the Interstate Thruway running through Buffalo, which served as a pedestrian connection, re-stitching the fragmented city to its waterfront, and the TIFF Nature Preserve located on Buffalo's Outer Harbor. It at once served as a landscape infrastructural substrate with which to clean and remediate water from the highway, in addition to serving as a substrate for animal habitat. As opposed to the architectural program/intervention being assigned to students from the beginning, it was, rather, generated from a zoomed-out understanding at the city scale of infrastructure and hydrological systems which intersected it, including landscape recovery and a mapping exercise which revealed the site's palimpsest and multi-layered meanings. The ultimate final design proposal was generated by the student's research shaped by new knowledges garnered by scoping the urban condition.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the architectural project must be shaped by new knowledges garnered by the urban. This requires a paradigmatic shift and a fundamental re-questioning of the notion of site as simply a static aspect of the architectural project. It also signifies a shift in how we teach architectural design, and how we integrate condition of urbanism to which architecture is responsive. These create new architectural narratives, which are multi-layered and multi-scalar responses. Alternative and new methods of representation and process become critical in order to understand the urban built environment. This includes the gathering of urban knowledge and research, as well new methods of representation, including mapping but at the same time appropriating architectural methods of exploration in urbanism. The built environment around us can be understood through a multi-scalar scoping of the urban landscape, as well as through the recalibrating of new architectural narratives. These foster architecture graduates who are trained in critical thinking, making them competitive with builders and developers who currently monopolize control of the built environment. These create new possibilities and paradigm shifts, as well as fertile hybrids. The architectural project must be grounded in research and scope, creating narratives based on scaled responses, which transcend fixed programs and site, while producing new forms of knowledge from a scoping of the urban. Architecture students have the ability to be critical thinkers, thus strategically positioning themselves to generate contextual architectural interventions. These interventions have the agency have a greater impact on the city, as they can work across scales or have scales of impact as urban catalysts, blurring boundaries that can engage ideas garnered by urban knowledge with hybrid proposal and programs.