Acupuncture Urbanism

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In times of accelerated urban transformations and limited predictability, top-down design instruments like the master-plan have become ineffective in tackling contemporary urban conditions. By contrast, this studio engages urban milieus inductively: analyzing prevailing ecologies, inscribed cultural codes and the socio-political forces at play in order to seek neuralgic points of design intervention that act as catalysts in the transformation of neighborhoods. Beyond designing buildings, the studio expands architecture students’ repertoire to designing situations and events that promise to bring people together. Rather than obsessing over a final product, here design is explored as a tactical and performative tool for encouraging community engagement and supporting residents’ collective right to the city.

In Spring 2018, the Collaboratory Studio at Carnegie Mellon’s School of Architecture explored temporary interventions for addressing the vacant land of the Manchester neighborhood on Pittsburgh’s Northside. Collaborating with the Manchester Academic Charter School, the studio studied how to open up the school to the neighborhood, and begin transforming surrounding vacant lots into a playscape and community meeting place. Weekly participatory design workshops with students from the middle school led to an overall strategy for reorganizing the parking, drop-off and pick-up situations, as well as a long-term vision for transforming vacant lots and buildings. Thus the studio was as much about designing a community engagement process as it was about realizing a full-scale micro-public space.

Meanwhile, our engagement sessions brought about an urge to render the planning and projection process tangible through immediate action. Together we built three “Roaming Porches” that serve as outdoor classrooms in the school’s vicinity. During the youth workshops, the porches of existing houses in the neighborhood emerged as key elements: On the one hand, we learned that the distinct architectural features played a vital role in the rediscovery and subsequent revitalization of the neighborhood. On the other hand, we heard that they are important social spaces. By playing with familiar elements, while configuring them into something entirely new, the Roaming Porches feel contextual and yet trigger curiosity.

Rather than conceiving of the design-build projects as final products, the studio framed the porches as stepping stones for community engagement and possible alternative futures in an ongoing transformation process. Our work with MACS was accompanied by the non-profit organization Grounded, which then took over our urban design framework and used the porches throughout the summer for further community engagement sessions and events. A partial implementation of the playscape with volunteers from the neighborhood and school is currently planned in the summer of 2019.

Overall, the studio offers an opportunity to see a very small project through from conception to realization within only 15 weeks, and combine abstract systemic thinking with very concrete and hands-on action, in short, to think globally and act locally. Likewise, the studio encourages boldness in terms of the changes students aspire to, especially when confronted with problems such as urban blight, yet humility and pragmatism in the implementation of their visions, especially when bearing the responsibility of working with a community.
ACUPUNCTURE URBANISM
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