

METROPOLIS LABORATORY 2012 - IN SEARCH FOR WHAT COULD BE

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If cities can be imagined and made, they can also be re-imagined and re-made. (David Harvey)

The re-imagining of the city can be seen as the very essence of the fourth Metropolis Laboratory, which took place in Copenhagen from the 7th to the 9th of June 2012. Metropolis Laboratory is part of Metropolis Biennale, organized by Copenhagen International Theatre (KIT). The biennale consists of a festival for art in public space and a laboratory for testing, presenting and discussing potential artists, topics and approaches that may feature at the up-coming festival.

Authenticity and change

According to David Harvey the freedom to make and remake our cities is one of the most precious yet one of the most neglected of our human rights. Metropolis Laboratory can be seen as in direct response to this, as it opens up for a *changing* of Metropolis by facilitating discussions and experiments on the possibilities and limitations in the public domain. “We want to comment on the city as a phenomena” the artistic director Trevor Davies, stated while introducing the wide range of themes that KIT found particularly relevant for this edition of the laboratory: instant architecture, festivals as tools for changing the perception of public spaces, walking in the city, augmented reality and urban gaming. The recurring questions being: Who has the right to negotiate with the city? How to bring quality to urban space? How can the arts provide alternatives and new approaches to the way we organize and live in our cities? And finally, the essential question that, in a spirit of optimism, not focuses on what we can loose but rather asks: What can be done?

Now, an obvious counter question would be: What can be done about what? Why is it so important that we provide alternatives to the way our cities are currently developing?

According to the award-winning urban sociologist, Sharon Zukin, setting the scene for the further discussions at Metropolis Laboratory, our cities are subject to a series of profound ongoing changes that are leading to a loss of the authentic city. Zukin uses the term authenticity to depict a change, which –in its essence- is self-destructive: urban planners and policy makers focus on the construction of images of authentic neighbourhoods as these are often entitled a certain “vibe” and originality. However, the construction of this so-called “authenticity” may eventually lead to an up-scaling of a neighbourhood, rise in local real-estate prices, eviction of former inhabitants and ultimately to a radical transformation of the neighbourhood itself in terms of a destruction of its original “soul”.

But is all change really that bad? And what does the term authenticity imply? Isn't it just a buzzword? Or an outdated phenomenon? Or is it just another way of talking about taste?

It became clear that using a cultural latent word such as authenticity when talking about contemporary cities provoked several reactions from the audience at the laboratory. While Zukin encouraged the audience to fight for the "good authenticity", it soon became clear that authenticity for many in the audience had quite negative connotations. "Not all places want to be authentic, conformity is a danger!" the Romanian in the audience proclaimed. "It is dangerous to speak of authenticity besides diversity," the South-African delegate stated. What all the comments and reactions made clear is that authenticity is a socially produced word, which is a living concept that constantly needs to be re-defined.

Public space and public art

The discussion around authenticity provided an important framework for the laboratory, as it is closely linked to the discussions about public space. According to Zukin authenticity cannot be attribute of a physical place alone, but is necessarily tied to the interaction of social groups that inhabit an urban locale. The same can be said for public space. As Davies pointed out in one of the discussions, public means common, it means being part of a community. Public space is you and I, as Imanuel Schipper, one of the lecturers stated. Going into public space then, is an act of power and/or a political act as it directly relates to you and me, our daily lives and the reality we live in. If we take this discussion further and have a look upon the role and function of art in public space, which is one of the main aspects of the Metropolis Biennale and Laboratory, public art is not simply art put in public space, but it should create possibilities to interact. Public art is art that has as its goal and desire to engage with its audiences. It should produce meaning for territorial areas and make spaces –whether material, virtual or imagined- within which people can identify themselves. Public art should create a renewed reflection on society, of the use of public spaces or on our behaviour within them. It should create a situation in which alternatives are made possible. It should not reproduce common sense, but try to undermine it. In other words, public art has the responsibility to challenge the existing hegemony and try to disarticulate it. The projects and talks presented at the Metropolis Laboratory were all examples of such an approach to public art.

The creation of a democratic space

One example of an approach to public art that wanted to challenge the existing hegemony was exemplified by the performance *Invisible Walls*. The performance aimed at changing the notion of public space in Kosovo. Here the ruling elites would normally use public space for political projects. Thus, the

art put in public space was part of a monumentalism that, as Lefebvre warned, “masks the will to power and the arbitrariness to power beneath signs and surfaces that claim to express collective will and collective thought”. *Invisible Walls*, on the other hand, wanted to create a context in which to work with critical art in public space. By staging street theatre performances that broke with the social and political barriers that stops movement and communication in public space, they introduced a public art that wanted to debate rather than decorate, and by this wanted to create a social and democratic space.

The creation of a social space was also the aim of Jorge Lobos and his project *Architecture and Human Rights*. Inspired by the possibilities of the arts to open up for alternatives and experiments, Lobos uses architectural strategies to facilitate a social space and enhance the quality of life in cities. Lobos advocated a utopian and political architecture that is based on the recovering of local meanings and identities. The term utopia in this context then, does not refer to utopian representations that remain within dominant values and ideologies, such as for example the (mis) use of authenticity dominant in the processes of “disneyfication”. Zukin, among others, criticizes this use of utopia for projecting a muzzy, spurious and dead past with putative links to local tradition. Instead of this utopia, which focuses on a spatialized and dead urban form, Lobos refers to a living utopia of processes that offers a mode of critique and that desires a better way of being and living. Lobos’ utopian architecture thus becomes a social project. One example of this is an action undertaken by Lobos during demonstrations taking place in Santiago. The government downplayed the number of people protesting in the media, and Lobos designed balloons showing the real number of demonstrators for the media to see. Another example is the refugee camps in Sri Lanka, which Lobos has particularly designed in order to provide housing structures that enhance the safety of its citizens.

In the presentation of his work, Lobos particularly focused on architecture as cultural processes and the importance of the life *between* the buildings. This focus was also reflected in the work of the city architect of Copenhagen, Tina Saabye. In the spirit of the famous Danish architect, Jan Gehl, Saabye advocated that one should consider urban life before urban space, and urban space before urban buildings. In this regard, Saabye praised artistic and temporary approaches to working with the city and create vibrant urban spaces. She pointed out that it is easier to experiment and get permissions to do things in public space when you are doing an art project. As Davies summarized it: “By labelling something as art you create a different moral code where the city is not merely a service function but a democratic place”.

But what is actually a democratic place?

In her presentation, Saabye emphasized the level of satisfaction amongst the citizens of Copenhagen as a key factor for democratic place. According to her 80% of the citizens of Copenhagen

are satisfied with their city. “Next year”, Saabye proclaimed, “the aim will be 90% satisfaction”. The audience questioned Saabye’s emphasis on satisfaction: Do we really want a city where 90% are satisfied? What about the diversity that Saabye herself advocated? Doesn’t it risk being lost in this overall model of elite consensus and agreement? “In your presentation I am confronted with a vision of the city based on white children families, I am black and single –where do I fit in this picture of Copenhagen?” one of the women in the audience asked. “I do not want to live in a city where everyone is satisfied” another exclaimed, “I want an exciting city where differences and contestations are made explicit.”

It became clear after Saabye’s presentation that a democratic place, in the minds of the audience of Metropolis Laboratory, was defined more as a place for encounters between heterogeneous groups and individuals, than for a homogeneous group of like-minded people. Furthermore, it was defined more as a place for enunciating difference and disagreements than for submitting to an overall consensus.

Temporary and instant approaches

The use of temporary approaches as a driver for urban development was one of the heart causes of Saabye. According to her temporary approaches makes it possible to create commitment, involvement, empowerment, dialogue and to create experiments that you can learn from subsequently.

These points were also exemplified by the project *72 Hours Urban Action* from Tel-Aviv. The project is the world’s first real-time architecture competition where 10 international teams have 3 days and 3 nights to design and build projects in public space. The competition aims to challenge the way we think about space by showing an approach to architecture that is dynamic, flexible, experimental and in direct response to local needs. According to the initiators of the project, architecture as such is too static, and wanted to show that a city and a place could –with a good portion of engagement and creativity- undertake a radical change in only 72 hours.

The question of time is an important one in the context of urban development. As Davies pointed out, many re-generation projects may be lasting up to 15 years. Within this long time frame it is hard to make citizens participate in the process. In 72 hours however, it is more accessible to participate in leaving your mark on the city. However, the question is what happens after the 72 hours? How can these temporary actions and measures be transformed into permanent planning? Is this initiative really creating leverage, which is rooted in local needs? Or is it “nothing but a travelling circus” as one person in the audience termed it?

72 Hours Urban Action may be seen as an example of the so-called “rise of instant activism in architecture”¹ (Robles-Dúran). Instant activism is here alluding to an instrumentalization of activism for making a redevelopment process look justified and bottom-up in order to avoid a civic opposition to an urban project. Furthermore, instant activism in architecture implies an aggrandizement and self-aggrandizement of the architect, and an expanded confidence in his or hers socially transformative powers. However, design knowledge and tools become futile when confronted with the conflictive urban realities that construct our cities, and quite useless in the search of a more profound and dynamic understanding of the social relations that surround the production of urban space. The organizers of *72 Hours Urban Action* admitted that they had experienced local stories getting lost when the participating architects were too fixed on their own design idea. These projects often did not last, but got torn down by the locals shortly after the competition ended. This experience reminds us that activism cannot be instant; it is formed by a long and constant struggle to stand in critical opposition to the injustices of present development.

Despite of these criticisms, *72 Hours Urban Action* may provide an important learning process for the participating architects. The project opens up for a rethinking of the systems and institutions of urban development and the construction of an architectural practice that constantly seeks the capacity to engage in the urban debate and have a socio-political leverage in the shaping of its territory. An important leverage of *72 Hours Urban Action* thus, is not necessarily the physical impact on the environment, but rather on the mind set of architects and urban planners.

City-writing and walking

While *72 Hours Urban Action* wanted to leave a mark on the city through a somewhat commercialized version of activism, the project *City of letters* focused on leaving a mark on the city by a form of activism which is part of a constant struggle to be in opposition to the establishment and the injustices of present development, namely graffiti or -as the insiders would call it- “city writing”.

City of letters invited the so-called “city-writers” to build a city out of their “tags” (the graffiti label of their names) as a way to re-claim and create a sense of ownership over public space in the suburbs of Stockholm. The project questioned the function of street-art in the city. It pointed to how street-art can contest the principal of signification which is embedded in the codes of the city, i.e. in form of the commercials and visual signs telling us where to look, to stand, to go as well as what to do. By interrupting these codes of signification by what seems to be a visual sign with no particular meaning,

¹ Robles-Durán, M. (2011) The Rise of Instant Activism, and How it's Transforming Architecture, Urbanism and the Way Our Cities are Built, in De Cauter, L, De Roo, R & Vanhaesebrouck, K. (2011) *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*, Belgium: NAI Publishers.

except from the visible mark and trace of a city-writer, graffiti may represent a subversity that disrupts the taken for granted order. “City-writing” is a reclaiming of space in the most literary use of the word as local citizens are signing and putting their names on the urban surface through a highly personal approach that opens up a space for alterity, transgression and breaking of the norms.

Another personal approach to the city is found in the act of walking. In the spirit of the French scholar Michel de Certeau and his statement that what constitutes the city is movement through the city, the act of walking was dealt with on the second day of the Metropolis Laboratory.

Associate Professor and Professor in Performance Studies, Nicolas Whybrow and Roberta Mock, opened the day with presentations on walking as creative practices in urban space and the relationship between walking, performance and autobiography. The topic of walking in the city is well rehearsed in literature, ranging from the drifting figure of Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s flâneur, to the more politicised and productive drift of the Situationists, and finally to the current hype around the “free running” provided by ParcourS. Why is the act of walking in the city so important?

Whybrow and Mock emphasised the revelatory potential of walking. Walking can be seen as a *practice* that offers a particular sensibility to the detail of quotidian urban activity. The link to the notion of authenticity, as introduced in the beginning of Metropolis Laboratory here becomes evident: The act of walking promises authenticity in the form of a corporeal brushing with the “real” and “immediate” aspects of the city. This form of authenticity cannot be constructed because it is transient and ever shifting, it produces conditions in which unexpected perspectives present themselves. Whybrow exemplified how the foot can be seen as a creative instrument that transforms the feet into eyes and receptors. Mock pointed to walking as an approach to evoke collective memory as it makes it possible to re-discover the unofficial and hidden stories of our cities, and create a sense of ownership. There is perhaps not a big wonder why artists increasingly base their urban performances and interventions on a walking audience; In line with what should be the goal of public art, walking produces meaning for territorial areas and makes spaces.

Play the city

The transformative potential of tactical movement in urban space was also emphasized in the concept of urban gaming, which was discussed on the third and last day of Metropolis Laboratory. The Berlin-based game-collective Invisible Playground sat the scene by introducing their work with making site-specific games in urban contexts. Central to the work of Invisible Playground is the notion of play and its ability to open up for new perspectives and (re) imaginations of the city. In many ways the work of Invisible Playground carries out Henri Lefebvre’s vision of the collective game as a claim to participatory citizenship. However, while Lefebvre regarded play as the ultimate expression of a social

revolution that should change our daily lives, Invisible Playground emphasizes the function of play as an ephemeral art form. “It is important that play goes away again”, the collective proclaimed, “We do not want to end up living in a game”. Hence, while Lefebvre focused on the unstructured and unofficial aspects of play, Invisible Playground emphasizes the formal structure of the game. The games made by Invisible Playground provide structures and a “safety-net” of rules and social contracts that enable people to play in the city. These are not games that you escape to, but rather games that provide a view on the outside world. By breaking with the here and now, these games can create a space for challenging what is, for disrupting dominant assumptions about social and spatial organisation, and for imagining other possibilities and desires.

Conclusion

After three days of discussions, talks and workshops, what can we conclude? Or rather, alluding to the more active phrasing of the opening question: What can be done? How can we become better at experimenting together and in the process navigate towards new, inspiring and possible futures of our cities?

Just as there is not any singular definition of authenticity or public space, there is not any singular answer to this question. However, Metropolis Laboratory 2012 shows us that there are alternatives at work, alternatives that provide spaces for negation, experimentation and new openings. Whether it is *Invisible Walls* or *Architecture and Human rights* aiming to create a social and democratic space, Tina Saabye’s temporary approaches opening up for experimenting with Copenhagen, the instant activism of *72hrs Urban Action* rethinking the construction of architectural practice, the re-claiming of public space through graffiti tags, the focus on walking as a way to produce meaning for territorial areas or *Invisible Playground’s* games opening up for new perspectives and (re) imaginations of the city.

These projects are just a selection of all the inspiring, disruptive and future-thinking projects and talks that were presented at Metropolis Laboratory. I could go on discussing the rest of the projects, such as Sarah Gebran’s *Vertical Gardening* project in a Palestinian refugee camp, the *Global Stories* of Ditte Maria Bjerg working with the stories of Moroccan women, the changing perceptions of Hackney in London provided by the audio app *Hackney Hear*, or the audio platform *escoitar* enhancing intangible cultural experience through acoustic memory.

The common denominator of all these projects is the search for more imaginative ways of working with the city and using art to creatively produce the city in the interest of its citizens. By providing a platform for the different thinkers and practitioners involved in these projects and thoughts, Metropolis Laboratory enables and encourages us to re-imagine and maybe even re-make our cities, not in regards to what already is, but in regards to what could be.