

Reactivating neglected spaces

Bottom-up interventions as catalyst of urban regeneration

Sónia Esteves¹, Helder Casal Ribeiro²

¹Student at Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto, Portugal

²Assistant Professor FAUP; Researcher CEAU – FAUP Group Atlas da Casa – Identidade e Transferência

“It is no longer a question of substituting one set of planning ideas for another within the closed system, but the situation calls for a radical reappraisal of the whole system.”¹

The present study focuses on the discussion and problematization of some of the emerging themes in the contemporary architecture debate, aiming to evaluate the pertinence of strategic intervention in the city, in a bottom-up method, that allows to respond more effectively to social and urban needs. In this way, the aim is to question the contemporary architectural production focusing on specific interventions in the city, that are quick in their response, able to awake the regeneration of the surrounding area and interfere in their social dynamics.

The economic reality in Europe and the scarcity of financing, conditioned by the economic crisis that affected the real estate market and the planning of cities, triggered new approaches in the field of architecture, especially in the management of resources associated with small and medium-scale urban interventions. Consequently, there have been alternative practices where the main actors are multidisciplinary teams and citizens interested in the problems of the city and public space, that means, concerned with reactivating

¹ HUGHES, Jonathan, SADLER, Simon, *Non-plan: essays on freedom participation and change in modern*, p. 28

buildings and neglected areas. Projects are financed through crowdfunding or other alternative financial support. These works give priority to values absent in the *modus operandi* of the economic market, specifically social justice and environmental awareness. The projects start from an understanding of the social role of the architect, who intervenes in a broader field of constraints and not just in the creation of an architectural object that responds exclusively to the program. Decisions no longer come from the empowered but rather from the citizens, in a bottom-up sense.

Through three case studies, selected with rigorous criteria that concern the themes of reactivation of the place, community financing and their social and spatial dynamics, it is proposed to analyze the pertinence of these interventions for the development of cities at an architectural and social level. To embrace distinctive solutions, three collectives of different geographies and *modus operandi* were selected: ZUS, based in Rotterdam (Holland), formed in 2001, coordinated by two architects, KARO* based in Leipzig, formed in 1999, composed by three members, 2 architects and a mechanical engineer/designer and Raumlabor, based in Berlin (Germany) formed in 1999, composed by eight architects/designers.

These collectives, as multidisciplinary teams, are interested in researching new urban opportunities through a specific design and construction process, ensuring an effective urban and social regeneration. Their approach and notions are rooted in the great ideas of the 60s and 70s; however, they are able to deepen the different participative concepts by turning these utopias and experimental thinking into something real in the complex context that is the contemporary city. The three ateliers work and research in the fields of urban planning and architecture, focusing on the relationship between permanent and temporary facilities, encouraging the participation of the inhabitants and in self-management. The city is perceived as an organic whole

where the architectural/structural object is one of several aspects that (in)form it, along with social, cultural and economic structures.

Our aim is to talk about new ways of doing, respecting the human being in its complexity, thus his/her environment and social community, finding alternative ways to the growth-at-any-cost mantra we were forced to believe.²

Eichbaum is a subway station located between the cities of Essen and Mulheim. Located at the intersection of two highways, the station was built in the 1970s as part of an infrastructure project for the future, a new zone of high urban density. Like several modernist masterplans, this area facing social and urban transformations, has become an inhospitable place, waiting for a new urban intent to trigger its renewal. Raumlabor proposed, in 2009 *Eichbaumoper*, a real utopia, that transformed the subway station into a gathering point and, ultimately, into an Opera House. Containers stacked in a subway station serve as a meeting point between the locals and the atelier. The station's staircases and platforms have become a temporary stage for several performances by inhabitants, local groups and invited artists. With this intervention, the station can now be used by local residents and artists as a studio and workspace, and also offers space for various activities like workshops, conferences, bar, cinema, art gallery and reading café. The recent *Opera House* has been declared as an architectural symbol of change and reactivation. The success of this project has led to a new vision among the local population, designers and planners. The totally abandoned station has become a place of possibilities for the whole community.

² RAUMLABOR, Crowdfunding Cantiere Barca [online], 2015 [Acedido em Dezembro 2016]. Disponível em: <http://raumlabor.net/crowdfunding-for-cantiere-barca/>

In 2009, KARO* reinterpreted the social meaning of a vacant lot in Leipzig by creating a temporary library articulating different renewed public spaces with the help of the local population. This was an abandoned site with post-industrial landscape, vacant lots and an occupancy rate of 20%. The aim was to improve and create new social networks. Initially an old abandoned store was used to discuss project strategies, which afterwards was converted into a reading café. One of the renovated public spaces, with a stage like character, was used for primary school plays as well as for public readings, concerts by local bands and other cultural and community events. A short time after the project's launch significant changes were noticeable in the surrounding areas, with the first houses being successfully renewed and sold.

The central district of Rotterdam, characterized by postwar modernism to 1980's postmodernism structures, showed the first signs of abandonment in 2006. Along the railway line several buildings, including Schieblock, succumbed to a high vacancy register. The companies that once settled in these offices were drawn out of the city center. In 2008 new developments were about to start, several buildings were scheduled to be demolished giving rise to new and larger office buildings, even though there was no prospects of occupation.

In 2009, ZUS with the International Architecture Bienal of Rotterdam, officially declared Rotterdam's central district as a Test Site, selecting Schieblock as a pilot case, in order to prove that new and unconventional ways of intervening in the urban fabric could work. In the same year Schieblock's floor plan was already being filled with activities.

From that year on Schieblock has been constantly full of socially interactive activities and in 2012 its influence led to a new bridge, built through crowdfunding, linking the district to neighbouring areas boosting the local economy and consequently integrating a diverse community.

Clearly, the present study acknowledges that these strategic urban interventions, in a bottom-up method, are only one of several ways of interpreting urban and architectural problems i.e. this *modus operandi* cannot be understood as a unique or lonely solution but as another contribution in understanding the complexity of the contemporary urban dilemma.