WELTSTADT – WHO CREATES THE CITY? 

IS A JOINT INITIATIVE OF THE GOETHE-INSTITUT AND THE GERMAN FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, NATURE CONSERVATION, BUILDING AND NUCLEAR SAFETY (BMUB)
Exploring “Narratives of Place” in a recent talk at the New School in New York, American writer and poet Philip Lopate revealed that a large part of the pleasure he feels living in a city, is being able to choose whether he “wallowed in loneliness, self-pity and alienation” or allows himself to “enjoy the company of strangers”. Lopate remarked: “like Whitman, I am energized by the crowd and, momentarily, I believe in democracy. It is this relationship between cities and democracy by way of citizenship, that we set out to explore in our three part events, “Cities and Citizenship”, that took place in mid-March, in New York: a documentary film screening, “The Domino Effect” (2012) followed by a public conversation with the filmmakers at the Goethe-Institut downtown moderated by Alissa Burmeister, a full day conference organized as a collaboration between Parsons the New School for Design, New York University, and the Goethe-Institut, and finally, a series of workshops with architects, filmmakers, urban educators and activists held at the Goethe-Institut following the conference.

The conference was designed to explore city-making and citizenship, honing in three main themes: “Environment and Citizenship or The Social Construction of Nature in the City”; “Design, Participation and Citizenship”; and “Design Humanism”. Whereas the documentary tackled issues of community activism and gentrification in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the four workshops were designed to give participants the opportunity to work practically with themes and ideas from the previous two days. Urban space is an active participant in citizenship. After all, it is not by chance that the words polis, politics and the political are so closely related etymologically since ancient times as are city, civics and civilization. How might design enhance these connections? Can the design of cities contribute to democratic ideals of commonwealth, participation and equality, a community of shared interests and purpose, that is the essence of citizenship? To what extent is the twenty-first century citizen finding new ways of inhabiting the city – and for that matter, what does it mean to “inhabit” the city today?

According to a report by the United Nations Human Settlements Program, over the course of the next two decades the global urban population will double, from 2.5 to 5 billion. What does it mean to consider architecture and urbanism beyond the building as an isolated artifact? In addition, for architecture, the study of “nature” and especially urban nature is a relatively new or re-discovered territory. To explore a kind of natural history of the city, including other living organisms, from pigeons (see our conference participant Colin Jerolmack’s book The Global Pigeon, 2013) to ants and cockroaches, would be a fascinating path. Another, probed by the first panel of the conference, may be to consider what does it mean to situate the human environment, and human society, as a subsystem of our ecological environment. What are the implications? How is human society accountable to the complex order of the larger ecological system?

Ioanna Theocharopoulou leads a workshop on Design for an Aging Population at the Goethe-Institut Wyoming Building. © Goethe-Institut New York

IoANNA THEOCHAROPOULO is an architect and architectural historian. Her research focuses on cities and the concept of sustainability. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications including, most recently, the Urban Design Ecologies AD Reader, edited by Brian McGrath. She has participated in a number of events at the Goethe-Institut New York, and has curated academic conferences at Parsons the New School for Design, where she is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Constructed Environments, and at the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University.
What is the relationship between nature and the city? How are the bounds between a democratic, open-access approach to citizenship and the micro-community method that emphasizes expertise and extensive training negotiated? Is it possible to design spaces as realms of free speech and activism, or is the idea of “designed democracy” antithetical to spontaneous and genuine demonstrations of citizenship?

These are just a few of the questions addressed at March 14th’s Cities and Citizenship conference, co-organized by Global Design and the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. The conference featured a series of panels that engaged with the ways in which the construction of the city and the nature of its inhabitants are connected, and the role of the citizen. Drawing on historical understandings of how urban centers have been both geographically and socially delimited, the conference sought to inspire an understanding of the city’s role in shaping the 21st century “green city.”

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NEW YORK'S URBAN LEGACY

In the Spring of 2007, three New York City museums joined forces to honor the work and legacy of the most ambitious master planner and builder the city had known in the 20th century. As a leader of several public agencies for more than three decades, Robert Moses changed the face of the city like no one else.

Prior to the simultaneous shows in 2007 at the Museum of the City of New York, the Queens Museum and the galleries at Columbia University, the assessment of Moses’ legacy in urban planning and architecture circles had been virtually unanimous. Moses was vilified for destroying neighborhoods and communities in the name of his technocratic vision of the modern city. He displaced tens of thousands of families under the guise of slum clearance, rendered residential areas uninhabitable by running highways through them and created public housing ghettos that aggravated social problems rather than solving them.

The 2007 exhibitions, however, were surprisingly kind to Moses. They painted a more nuanced picture of his efforts, and surprisingly kind to Moses. They painted a more nuanced picture of his efforts, and realized his vision of the city were more subtle, but every bit as effective, as those of Robert Moses. By enabling strong alliances between politicians and developers, he stifled democratic participation in the planning process.

In 2007, when Robert Moses’ legacy was re-assessed, mayor Michael Bloomberg was five years into his 12-year tenure as mayor of New York, which ended in January of 2014. From the beginning, Bloomberg had had urban planning ambitions on a scale that the city had not seen since Robert Moses. And not since Robert Moses had anyone been as successful as Bloomberg in changing the face of the city.

Bloomberg rezoned 40 percent of the city, changing or eliminating the traditional limitations placed on the usage of certain areas. On his watch, neighborhoods have been re-dedicated and developed, more often than not for high-end housing and retail, while manufacturing has all but disappeared from the city. The underutilized post-industrial waterfronts have been developed, Midtown and Lower Manhattan have seen an enormous construction boom. And on the west side of Manhattan an entire new community, conceived entirely at the drawing board, is coming into being.

The Bloomberg administration started a new era of large scale urban development in New York City. The mechanisms by which he achieved his development goals and realized his vision of the city were more subtle, but every bit as effective, as those of Robert Moses. By enabling strong alliances between politicians and developers, he stifled democratic participation in the planning process.

More than fittingly, the three-day program on “Cities and Citizenship” in downtown Manhattan opened with the screening of “The Domino Effect”, a documentary film that explored exactly how public participation was suppressed in Bloomberg’s New York. The filmmakers, Brian Paul, Megan Sperry and Daniel Phelps, spent several years filming the efforts of the residents of the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn to prevent a dramatic demographic shift in the area after the main employer, the Domino Sugar factory, closed in 2004.

The screening set the stage for an intense two-day multidisciplinary dialogue on how citizens might be empowered to address the pressing issues of our time and help improve life in New York and cities in general. Not least, because the conditions for participation have become extremely complicated here, New York proved to be a particularly fertile ground for such exploration.

This became most evident in the presentations of practitioners such as Susanne Schindler, Matthias Hollwich and Susannah Drake, architects with civil missions who have successfully pursued projects or are pursuing projects in New York City. Dealing with the conditions in Bloomberg’s New York has forced them to rethink and expand their roles as designers and architects and develop a new creativity in utilizing their work toward social ends.

Hollwich, Schindler and Drake might be called activist designers, a new breed of designers that Cities and Citizenship curators chose to place at the center of the New York project. Mitchell Joachim, one of the project curators and also Co-Founder and Director of Research at the Brooklyn Navy Yard’s Terreform One, considers himself to be one of these designers, who no longer think of “good design” as merely aesthetically enriching our everyday lives. This new generation of designers, ranging from architects to industrial designers, strive instead to “actively contribute to shaping society”. Joachim considers them “applied sociologists”.

One of Joachim’s primary goals for the conference was to create a dialogue between such applied sociologists and actual academic sociologists. It was a true experiment to find out whether the two groups would be able to find a common language and perhaps help answer each other’s questions.

The first concept that the theoreticians and practitioners tried to close in on was that of participation and citizenship itself. The social scientists’ historical and theoretical models were juxtaposed with the practitioners’ real experiences of participation as well as their utopian visions of it.

The political scientist Andreas Kalyvas
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—Sebastian Moll
ENVIRONMENT & CITIZENSHIP OR, THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NATURE IN THE CITY

The first conference panel sought to identify how the construction of “nature” informs the construction of the urban subject or citizen, and explore new and emerging sites at which “nature” occurs in the city. To what extent are urban spaces inhabited “naturally”, by whom, for whose benefit? What are the social and ecological consequences of our continuous construction, reconstruction and appropriation of urban nature?

At the beginning of his seminal essay Luftkrieg und Literatur, W.G. Sebald describes an American-British vision for a re-ruralized post-World War II Germany. This was not just an abstruse method to insure that Germany would never again be an aggressor nation. By 1944, this vision was asserting itself de facto in the shells of the residual German metropolises left in the wake of bombing raids and ground battles.

While repastoralization may certainly tell us something about the Anglo-American catechism of wholesome rural life as antidote to the evils of urbanization, it also has a peculiar relevance to questions of urban sustainability. Conventional wisdom tells us that cities arose in response to the surplus produced elsewhere: surplus gave rise to trade, trade gave rise to centralized marketplaces which in turn gave rise to cities. The city has historically served to gather and leverage what the hinterland produced: urban crafts guilds added value to raw materials, crops and piecework were monetized, knowledge was assembled and disseminated in cities.

But the story could be told quite differently, as Edward Soya has done in his brief article Putting Cities First. Soya argues that it was the rise of the cities, which was asserting itself de facto in the shells of the residual German metropolises left in the wake of bombing raids and ground battles.

The re-ruralized city – a city imagined from scratch as agricultural carrying capacity and technology. By analogy, you might imagine a whole city warming itself at the endorsement of energy and heat, water, food or air – is a history of increasingly invisible or abstracted surplus. This 1880 German design for a coal space heater speaks volumes: consistent and effortless heat is provided to the room by a vertical bin that continuously feeds the fire. The room occupant is no longer implicated in the tempering of the space she or he enjoys. The bin, of course, does not feed itself. The space next to the heated room, into which the slanted coal bin obstructs, is occupied by the servants who top off the coal supply. In this arrangement, comfort has become abstracted and denaturalized through this combination of invisible labor and technology. By analogy, you might imagine a whole city warming itself at the coal hearth, largely oblivious to the ever expanding landscapes on the other side of the wall or the myriad invisible technology connecting it to them.

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Urban Metabolism offers methods to quantify a city’s material flows relative to its spatial, historical, political and social environment. Its name is apt. Nothing, whether a living creature or a settlement, can have a metabolic rate of zero, despite ambitions to sustainability. Within sustainability studies, cities are often cited for the efficiency of their transportation, housing and supply or refuse infrastructures. Their on-demand relationship to their hinterlands in forming a globalized world defies this simple conclusion. It would be easy to locate urban metabolism as a study within the long history of rhetoric that describes cities as organisms or bodies, from the Renaissance discourse of ideal city planning to the 18th century beginnings of public health and urban reform movements. But as the fact of global hinterland challenges the viability of simple “sustainability” agendas, we increasingly need to understand how the non-anthropogenic that is at the root of all material flows constructs the city’s forms, practices and regimes. This might begin by relocating some of the hinterland within the city limits.

LYNETTE WIDDER teaches urban metabolism, resilience and building energy in the Masters of Sustainability program at Columbia University. She is a partner in aardvarchitecture, and has published extensively on architectural education, contemporary architecture and architectural history.
Throughout its history, the discipline of anthropology has recognized a foundational role for thought about the nature of society. Other in relation to human subjects, persons and things. Our interest is in developing an understanding of nature as regularity, governed by "laws" of nature served to stabilize knowledge of the world and order. On this basis, we have developed a new perspective on the role of nature in the construction of the urban subject within the physical limits of the city and its surroundings. The discipline's efforts to discover and classify human "natures" has taken root in the idea of nature as the stable backdrop ensuring regularities in environment that influence, in turn, regularities in behavior. While the recognition of chance and contingency as significant factors shaping urban worlds and social worlds are both transhistorical and dynamic, our protocols for constructing knowledge in the social sciences are based on decisions about what to hold constant and how to decide on what is certain. This foundational relationship between a transcendental, knowing subject and nature as object of knowledge as well as source of transcendence has now been overtaken quite decisively as anthropologists struggle with the impossibility of containing and consigning the role of chance and contingency to irregular occurrences. Scholars have shown that this shift is linked to the rise of a "reflexive" modernity, which recognizes the risks created by human intervention into nature. A new epistemology aspires for controlling and directing regularities and contingencies of nature for their own purposes. Reflexive modernity introduces the idea that, faced with the possibility of unknown risks, unexpected events and uncontrolled processes, there is no definitive knowledge, only provisional answers. This provisionality, in turn, generates more uncertainty. Thus there are no constants, only flux.

Why begin with this particular, epistemological account of nature in the context of urban studies? I want to consider the relationship between cities and citizenship in this form of settlement. In order to answer this question, I turn once again to the argument laid out at the beginning of this piece: that the foundational entanglement of nature – whether within or outside the physical limits of cities – is epistemological, revealing the strange traffic between codes or ways of knowing and ways of being. The modern concept of urban citizenship, in turn, is premised on a speculative and grounded premise of mastering nature and harnessing the potential of natural formations. But this premise is also premised on colonial rationalities that divide human, engineered, and ecological separations of between various natural features – especially soil and water but also land and air – to govern wild nature and produce order. In the process, these separations are reflected in social divisions within cities.

As economic formations, the labor required by cities is produced precisely by the spatial differentiation of labor in order to better exploit their labor capacity. Ecological switchpoints, where these separations between various natural features take place could be considered especially generative of the kind of compressed energy that is characteristic of "informal" life, in their present ideological forms. These are points where nature, infrastructure and vulnerable populations meet. My contention is that informal settlements have been generally viewed from a purely social perspective as lacking access to the types of infrastructure and habitats designed for full citizenship. However, if we consider such settlements in ecological terms as interactive, relational diagrams where people, infrastructure and nature meet, adding the element of nature to the dyad of people and infrastructure, we introduce a different perspective to our understanding of informality.

What can citizenship mean in these contexts? Elsewhere I have developed a careful formulation of speculation as a method through which contemporary urban communities are defined. Building on this formulation, I posit that in the speculative world of contemporary cities, when inherited structures of politics, landscape and economy are routinely in flux and when urban territory itself is a significant means by which finance capital circulates and settles, speculation as a method has also circulated rhizomatically across social groups, rendering cities more open to practices that are based on potentials rather than actualities. Indeed, my reading of urban informality is not romantic but is certainly through the lens of creativity fostered in the speculative process. The recategorization of natural forms in informal settlements takes place due to lack of choice but it also constitutes an exit from the calculative logics that confine marginalized groups and citizenship to specific places. In the work of informal settlement is the production of an ecology of relations amongst volatile and dynamic entities, themselves composed of mixtures between entities that we tend to separate in our epistemologies of city formation. The work of informal settlement is also the work of designing self-reliance by creating new spaces of operation that give definition and dimension to abstract concepts like citizenship, democracy and entitlement. Without understanding that labor – which is typically understood through the idioms of poverty, lack and decay rather than speculation and the creative incorporation of the virtual into the space of the possible – we may not be able to critically assess the potential forms of justice that could emerge from today's colonized cities, increasingly shaped by DIY cultures, whether those of artisanal localities like Brooklyn in New York or those of sweatshop neighborhoods like Dharavi in Mumbai.
URBAN SPACE AND PARTICIPATION

Ionna Theodaropoulou

My research explores the fluidity and improvisation of urban space. I am interested in the city as a continuous system of ecological and performative forces and flows. Cities today are made up of new instances where “urban” and “interior” mingle in interesting ways: the interior is no longer only a “shell” but a city, just as the city can be experienced as a vast interior with its own anatomy, degrees of interiority, ecology, unscripted privacy and publicity. I would like to suggest that there is an exciting process of re-invention of citizenship currently taking place today, through the built environment, where design lends agency to social action or can become a tool of participation in social life. The question of “insurgent citizenship” was explored in the second conference panel: spaces of everyday life, where invention, exchange, co-creation and mobilization of collective energies may re-imagine cities and citizens. Sociologist and urban theorist Saskia Sassen writes about a kind of interiority “in a city, of the city”, that consists of “the vacant grounds that enable residents who feel bypassed by their city to connect with it via memory at a time of rapid change [...] empty space that can be filled with memories [...] where activists and artists find a space for their projects [...] a making of presence that is an act of speech”. (see Do Cities Have Spaces? Public Culture, 2013)

In a different vein, writing about exhibition design, Italian architect and critic Andrea Branzi wrote about “the new internal functioning of the city” in relation to new technologies. For him, “the result is an extraordinarily pliable plankton that makes it possible to renew the form and the function of interior spaces inside the immobile containers of architecture... a sort of lubricant that prevents the city from seizing up and allows it to adapt itself continually...” (Exhibition Design as Metaphor of a New Modernity, Lotus International, 2002)

I want to suggest that current design activism is an act of speech. I see two ways in which design has started to become a tool of participation in this “pliable plankton” that is the twenty-first century city. The first has to do with emergency responses, and related to that, the second has to do with challenging processes of change.

Examples of designers’ responses to emergencies include initiatives to help those facing homelessness due to extreme poverty, such as the work of the Rural Studio in Alabama in the American South, founded by the late Samuel Mockbee in the early 1990s. Still in existence today, Mockbee devised a program of study that engaged students of architecture in design-build programs specifically aimed to address the needs of shelter of the largely underprivileged local community. Mockbee set out to teach students to become “sensitive to the power and promise of what they do”, by helping them see that they can serve a real community in need.

Other groups of designer-activists have sought ways to help those dealing with forced migration due to war or to extreme environmental conditions particularly in areas of the so-called global South. Founded in 1999, Architecture for Humanity, the most well-known such group, provides design and construction services to worldwide communities affected by natural disasters. In addition, there are a number of talented designers who have been working to build schools and hospitals particularly in Africa, either by winning competitions or by finding ways to get their work realized by themselves, as Diebedo Francis Kere has done in Burkina Faso, and the MASS Design Group with an award-winning hospital in Rwanda.

The second is a tool of symbolic action and intelligent use of overlooked opportunities in the realm of urban space. I see two ways in which design has started to become a tool of participation in this “pliable plankton” that is the twenty-first century city. The first has to do with emergency responses, and related to that, the second has to do with challenging processes of change.

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Ionna Theodaropoulou welcomes guests to the Cities and Citizenship conference at the Galatin School of Individual Study, NYU © Jake Maddox

Participants use building blocks to redesign a neighborhood and bring it to building code in Mark Toroory and the Center for Urban Pedagogy’s workshop entitled, What is Zoning? at the Goethe-Institut Wyoming Building © Jake Maddox

WELTSTADT
It is in the interstitial spaces between the old forms of governance that are increasingly failing, and emergent forms of organizational and communal self-management, where designers and urban activists today labor to introduce or boost democratic processes by co-designing broad participatory processes, bottom-up organizational approaches, networking strategies, and new innovative edifice ideas.

The context of this conference cannot be more opportune, as NYC transitions from the era of Michael Bloomberg’s administration to the new one headed by Mayor Bill de Blasio. This transition, how it takes place, and what it takes, takes place in a situation of an ongoing crisis: economic, cultural, ecological, and political. Bloomberg’s neoliberal policies have been widely criticized; after all, the rezoning of over 400 socio-spatial volumes and the proposed promising land mass is an act of historic proportions. Rezoning it for the purposes of making urban living without a serious public participation in the process, and by the means of collaborative processes and displacements of low-income residents, is an act of wicked proportions. At the very least, it asks for the revaluation of the principles of representative democracy, particularly at the regional and local level, and open the way for the scrapping of the idea of urban citizens play in important decision-making processes in the city. As the transition from one mayor to the next took place, NYC Department of Planning released The Metropolitan Mind: A City of Light, which prompted wide media coverage reporting that more foreign-born legal immigrants “live in NYC than there are people in Chicago”, some 3 million individuals, or 37% of NYC residents. The largest groups of these new urban citizens are from the Dominican Republic, followed by Bangladesh and a great number of Chinese who immigrated since the 1990s. Two thirds live in Brooklyn and Queens, and along B, Q and N train lines. In addition, the city’s limited English language proficiency, and the range of socioeconomic differences, form the median family income. Similar figures characterize the unprecedented influx of immigrants that makes the US to be also the unparalleled degrees and modes of mobility of individuals and groups across the city. The book would be fair to say that concepts of democracy, citizenship, and participation have never been as ambiguous as they are today.

As cities cut capital projects and maintenance budgets, and as private investors lack available capital or maintenance budgets, and as private partnerships in urban territories also the unparalleled degrees, and modes of long-term planning and the overall commitment to singular solutions to any given urban challenge. Based in the notion that a world today is a place where there are always multiple, equally plausible alternatives to all socio-spatial challenges, particularly in face of the impossibility of long-term planning and the overall commitment to singular solutions to any given urban challenge. Based in the notion that there are always multiple, equally plausible alternatives to all socio-spatial challenges, particularly in face of the impossibility of long-term planning and the overall commitment to singular solutions to any given urban challenge. Based in the notion that there are always multiple, equally plausible alternatives to all socio-spatial challenges, particularly in face of the impossibility of long-term planning and the overall commitment to singular solutions to any given urban challenge.
The building in the southern part of Midtown Manhattan is hardly the kind of place where you would expect to find a young architecture firm on the cutting edge of the trade. The walls in the narrow staircase of the rundown two-story commercial building are grimy; the hardwood floors of the two left spaces haven't been refinished in years, if not decades. The windows overlooking Fifth Avenue and 30th Street are milky and porous, hardly the stuff of the future and ecologically responsible architecture.

"Yes it sometimes breaks my German heart how much CO₂ we put out", sighs Matthias Hollwich, one of the two partners of HWKN. But until the up-and-coming firm moves into its new space in lower Manhattan, the old building, which is slated for demolition, serves the needs of the rapidly growing company well. Around 40 people have their work stations on the two floors, half of them employees of Architizer, the successful company well. Around 40 people have their work stations on the two floors, half of them employees of Architizer, the successful social network for architects that Hollwich and Kushner launched in 2009.

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The way Hollwich has tackled the issue of aging very much exemplifies the way HWKN operates. Hollwich embarked on a thorough revision of age.

When it comes to improving lives, Hollwich, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania when he is not running his office on 30th Street, is particularly passionate about one demographic: the elderly. Hollwich views the United States' treatment of people who are no longer self-sufficient as a kind of warehousing that verges on a human rights violation. "It is simply inhumane", he says. He questions traditional ideas of retirement as well as the conventional path of aging within the immediate family or all alone until one can no longer take care of oneself. In place of that, Hollwich envisions communities in which the aging can live with meaning, dignity, and productivity until the end of their lives.

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The Domino Sugar Factory has become somewhat of a monument for New Yorkers. Widely visible from the East River waterfront and the Williamsburg Bridge, the former refinery is a lonely remnant of Brooklyn’s industrial past. Perched between newly landscaped waterfront parks and modern residential highrises, the structure feels like the sole survivor of a bygone era.

For longtime residents of Williamsburg, however, the building is also a symbol for the long and arduous battle that they have been engaged in for more than ten years. It is the battle for their neighborhood, one of the most rapidly gentrifying areas of New York City with a dizzying rate of displacement.

When the Domino Sugar Factory closed in 2004, Williamsburg had already become a destination for artists and creative professionals fleeing the rising rents in downtown Manhattan. Yet the working class neighborhood previously sustained by industrial jobs remained relatively intact. There still was an abundance of low-income housing as well as manufacturing jobs. Today both are in short supply. The number of industrial jobs has decreased by almost 75 percent, an apartment of any size for less than 2000 dollars per month has become nearly impossible to find.

In 2005, parts of Williamsburg and Greenpoint were rezoned, removing industrial protections, and opening the area up to high-end residential development. The Bloomberg administration re-imagined Williamsburg as a community for a young, wealthy clientele working in technology, media and other creative industry jobs.

Domino Sugar stands on the East River waterfront, positioned directly in the path of the Williamsburg redevelopment plans. A subsidiary of the Community Preservation Corporation (CPC), a consortium of banks and insurance companies under the leadership of David Rockefeller, joined forces with the Katan Group and bought the property for 55 million dollars shortly after the mayor’s office announced the rezoning of the area. The plans to build luxury waterfront housing had clearly been made in advance.

For the next five years, the CPC underwent the mandatory public review process for the project, trying to gain public support for their enterprise. The documentary film The Domino Effect, which opened their Goethe-Institut New York’s Cities and Citizenship project, follows this process and exposed the charade that it truly was.

The filmmakers convincingly showed that all decisions had been made before the public review process even started. Agreements were worked out in advance between the developer and local politicians and organizations, the testimonies delivered at public hearings and in community board meetings came from the same paid supporters every time. Despite the action of community advocacy groups, the citizens of Williamsburg were rendered utterly powerless in the process.

Moreover, the promise made to the citizens to appease them turned out to be largely false claims. In exchange for over 100 million dollars in federal subsidies, the developers promised 660 units of so-called affordable housing. However only 100 of those units were actually affordable for the people that live in the vicinity of the plant, many of them families of former workers. Their income ranges from 19 to 29,000 dollars per year, most of the so-called affordable units however were slated for households earning 48,000 dollars per year or more. In calculating affordability, the city uses income data that includes the wealthy suburbs. Hence the numbers rarely accurately portray the true needs of inner city communities.

Another promise from the developers was that of job creation. The commercial office space made available in the new complex however will most certainly not attract industrial workers but the new Williamsburg demographic of young people in the tech and new media sector. Moreover, it is highly likely that the remaining manufacturing jobs in the neighborhood will disappear.

Thankfully, for the time being, all these plans are on hold. In 2012 CPC had to sell the property because it was nearly bankrupt from other failed real estate investments. It sold the Domino plant for 180 million dollars to a developer named Two Trees. The profits helped to protect CPC from bankruptcy.

Now the negotiations begin anew. With a new developer and a new mayor there is some hope that the revised plans will serve the existing community better than the CPC plans. But it is also clear that with an investment of 180 million dollars Two Trees is expecting a sizeable return. The Williamsburg example is a perfect case study for the way top-down urban planning has worked in New York over the past 15 years. The way politics and developers have pursued their visions while circumventing citizen participation in Williamsburg follows a playbook that has been applied all over the city: The Atlantic Yards in downtown Brooklyn, in Harlem and on the Lower East Side. All of these developments have been documented by independent filmmakers like Brian Paul, Megan Sperry and Daniel Phelps, often funded by private money or by crowdfunding. However their reach and opportunities for distribution have been limited.

New York City’s new mayor Bill de Blasio has promised to slow gentrification and provide affordable housing in all areas of the city. However filmmakers Sperry and Phelps are skeptical whether there is a true political will to stop or even reverse the process that has been termed “hyper gentrification” and that has befallen virtually all of New York City. As filmmaker Megan Sperry says: “We will continue to see the effects of the Bloomberg era for many years to come.”

This article does not include the developments of early 2016.
THE ACTIVIST DESIGNERS

The Team R8 around Jonathan Kirschenfeld, Karen Kubey, Nancy Owens, Susanne Schindler, Brian Schulman and Erin Shnier can be seen as a good example of "activist designers" or "applied sociologists". In their work, Team R8 put their design and architecture expertise entirely to use to find creative solutions for New York City's pressing affordable housing crisis.

The point of departure for R8 are some hard demographic facts. 33 percent of today's New Yorkers are single, 24 percent share housing units with other adults. 9 percent are single parents and only 17 percent are the traditional nuclear family. Yet the housing stock and many of the regulations that govern residential construction still have the nuclear family as its target. The result is a tremendous shortage of housing for the actual population of today's New York, where the traditional family is a minority.

Small units that were available at low cost 30 years ago have been replaced by luxury development and the city's growing hunger for hotel space to accommodate international tourists.

At the same time, a large underground market has developed. Basement and attic spaces are rented out as apartments, two- to three bedroom apartments are shared by four or more unrelated adults, which, technically, is illegal. In order to tackle this problem, the Team R8 has sought loopholes in residential building regulations and codes. And they have found them.

The New York City zoning code allows for so-called micro-units complemented by shared amenities only under Use Group III, or "Community Facilities". This includes dormitories, convents, and supportive housing, or long-term assisted living for special-needs populations. The regulatory framework is more flexible than Use Group II (residential housing), for instance by not requiring parking and allowing for smaller courtyard dimensions, which can substantially lower cost and make irregular and small parcels buildable.

Now Team R8 has proposed to extend the applicability of these regulations from community facilities to all residential construction. This would make a whole new range of housing options possible. The unit size could be reduced, no parking space would need to be made available, amenities could be shared and the required courtyard space could be reduced.

Of course Team R8 has concrete design proposals in place for the scenario in which the Supportive Housing regulations would be extended to a variety of sites, particularly to neighborhoods zoned as "R8" – meaning areas with midrise, dense apartment buildings.

The designs would provide a whole new range of affordable housing options to New Yorkers, at rates between 450 and 750 dollars per month. There would be large shared apartments with flexible space, that could be inhabited by several families, there would be small individual units with shared amenities, as well as loft-type spaces that are inhabited by a number of single individuals.

Key to these designs is the willingness to share spaces and amenities as well as the philosophy that in New York, the city itself, is a living room, a communal space shared by all at all times.

Written by Weltstadt Correspondent SEBASTIAN MOLL

Three examples of recent supportive housing projects by architect Jonathan Kirschenfeld in the Bronx and in Brooklyn. These irregular infill sites could only be developed thanks to the more flexible dimensional requirements of Use Group III. © Team R8

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THE CITY AS A LIVING ROOM

TEAM R8: Jonathan Kirschenfeld, Karen Kubey, Nancy Owens, Susanne Schindler, Brian Schulman, Erin Shnier, and Margaret Tobin

This page contains text discussing urban design and living spaces in New York City. The text outlines various housing options and regulatory environments. It also includes a diagram of the Flux, a large subdividable unit for households that wish to live together, with seven or more generous rooms that can be interconnected or separated. The text describes how this unit can accommodate different household sizes and uses, from singles to families. The diagram illustrates the layout of the Flux, emphasizing the flexibility of the design and the potential for various configurations.

(The text continues, discussing the Flux and other housing options, as well as regulatory frameworks and design considerations.)
Mongolia has one of the lowest population density of any country worldwide with an area of 1,564,116 square kilometers and a population of 2,800,000. More than 1.3 million people live in the country's capital Ulaanbaatar while approximately 1 million Mongolians still populate the country's wide prairies living as nomads or semi-nomads. The balance between urban and nomadic populations is expected to dramatically change in the future with more and more Mongolians migrating into the capital. This migration translates to a rapid growth of UB (4% yearly growth rate), which takes place mostly in the peripheral areas of the city, leading to a highly unique urban pattern: the ger settlements (Mongolian: yurt settlements) – an accumulation of informally claimed parcels, surrounded by high wooden fences and housing one or more gers (yurts) or detached houses. About 63% of the city’s inhabitants are living in ger settlements. However, only a 43% of the ger settlement dwellers still live in traditional gers, and most prefer consolidated dwellings built with conventional materials.

After further acceleration of informal ger settlement growth since democratisation in the early 1990s, the number of ger settlements continued to grow. Coupled with this demographic pressure is a growing infrastructural problem due to the slow improvement of technical networks, which can not keep up with the changes in the population patterns. Infrastructural problems remain major issues in Ulaanbaatar (only two percent of the total water supply is consumed in the ger settlements i.e. 8-10 liters day/person, while the average water consumption of apartment residents is about 285 liters per day, with other related issues, such as ground water pollution.

But the environmental impact of water management is surpassed by the immense air pollution problems caused, among other, by the ger settlements whose dwellers use inefficient wood coal ovens to heat their homes. Tires, plastics or other burnable garbage often serve as substitute for scarce and expensive wood or coal. Ulaanbaatar is also flooded of cars, buses and taxicabs. Even if public transport is widely used, the road network is insufficient and there is simply not enough space. By 2030 the city is expected to have half a million cars. Improving the network and streets is necessary and important now. As a result, Ulaanbaatar now struggles with air pollution, with an average concentration of particulated material (PM10) four times higher than the EU and developing countries standard and 14 times higher than the World Health Organization guideline value. During the winter months, AMHB data shows daily average concentrations peaks reaching 1,000 μg/m3, an amount which seriously impacts public health.

In recent years, the state has ceased to ignore the presence of the ger settlements and begun to plan towards systematic infrastructural improvement. Following the lines of international recommendations, such as those of the World Bank, the new Master Plan for Ulaanbaatar proposes a strategy for the ger settlements. Those closer to the city centre can be integrated into the urban fabric, densifying the lots in height, while the outer ring would continue to be a suburban periphery, where the priorities lie on the provision of infrastructure, accessibility and services.

One of the key challenges is to effectively combine top down state investment with the survival techniques and local expertise of the ger dwellers themselves. It remains an open question if the traditional ger remains a significant form of dwelling, beyond folklore or tourist attraction.

The Nomad City project was conceived in recognition of the urgency to develop an understanding of the internal patterns of social-spatial organization within the ger settlements as well as the lack of appropriate strategic policy, urban management and urban design responses. Nomad City is committed to the belief that this lack can only be addressed through the mobilization of ger residents and their involvement as key stakeholders of a multi-disciplinary discussion and planning process. This process should bring together both grass roots organizations as well as relevant organizations on the municipal and national level. The project has adopted Yarmag settlement in South-West Ulaanbaatar as a pilot site. Architecture and urban design students from Mongolia and Germany, as well as academics and experts from both countries have cooperated and will continue to cooperate with local community representatives and the community at large to develop and test a new approach towards community-driven neighborhood development. It is our aim that Nomad City will provide an impetus for an open debate to find an inclusive and creative solution for one of the most unique urbanization challenges in Mongolia and beyond.
The relationship between the city and the countryside is taking an important position in the global development strategies of African nations since gaining independence, in particular for the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. In the process, over the course of recent decades, the city has gained in significance in ways that must not be underestimated, especially with respect to the availability of (precarious) labor and the development of new occupational fields, which on the one hand are anchored in modernity, and interface with the informal sector on the other.

The developmental history of African cities prior to the era of colonialism until the post-colonial period is rich in lessons both with respect to the hybrid character of the cities as well as with respect to their lack of adaptability to new realities in the period following independence. Post-colonial urbanization did not take place in stages. Instead, a cityscape was preserved and continued that was not adapted to clearly identified needs. The city was and remains a place of commerce, financial exchange and cash flow, later a place for services, in the name of a modernization that nonetheless remained un governed. In most African countries, this phenomenon has led to a rapid and uncontrollable urbanization that has increased from 10% to 35% in the last 40 years.

In 2015, 60 % of the inhabitants of West Africa will be living in cities. In this process, migration is both trigger and consequence at the same time. It functions as a compensation system between two economically unequal milieus and raises the question of the interaction of the city and the countryside. It is constructing new identities and hybrid territorialities, half urban and half rural social spaces and systems that are difficult for economists, sociologists and urbanists to interpret. The city as in relation to the countryside.leads to new social networks, both within and between an environment with which people are not yet completely broken and the new milieu. This phenomenon is of the greatest interest to artists, economic and political decision-makers and civil society organizations.

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Cities and Citizenship

A project by the Goethe-Institut New York

Project direction: Wenzel Bilger, Alissa Burmeister, and Ioanna Theocharopoulou

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Partners: Global Design NYU, the Gallatin School, New York University and Parsons the New School for Design

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