A manifesto for a grassroots approach explores how architecture can be defined as an instrument for legitimising people's role in our society and its potential to stimulate social change.

Strategies for a better world

Emiliano Gandolfi

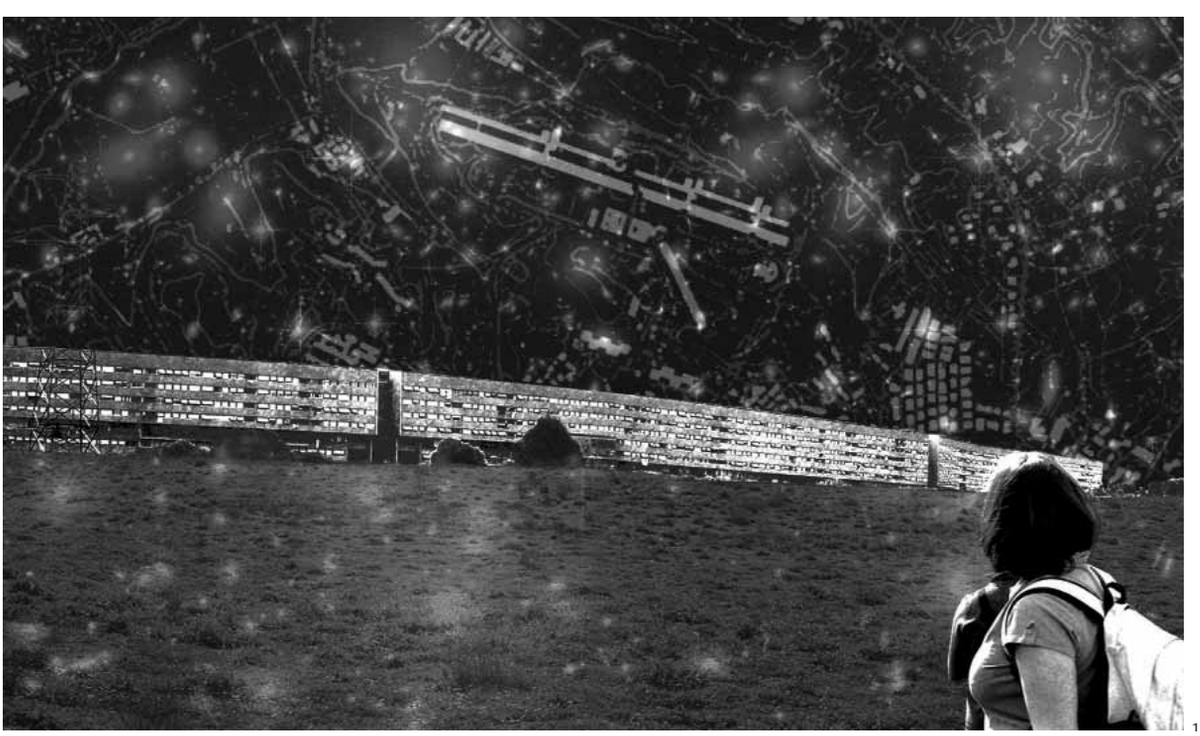
A different world is possible *[1]*. The work of an increasing number of architects reveals a renewed social interest and aspiration to define new instruments for coping with the issues of our cities. These architects do not subscribe to the agendas of bureaucrats, authorities and market players. Instead they listen to people's remarks, understand their problems and develop tools that stimulate people to think critically and actively about the built environment. For these activists, architecture goes beyond just designing buildings. It has to identify the needs of people and possible forms of aggregation, while stimulating processes that will enable us to live better. Groups like Team 10 and the movements of the '70s laid the bases of these practices, but unlike the past century, today every project becomes a sensitisation campaign that involves the community at the local level and that stimulates collective processes, spontaneous creativity and activism in order to incite a new political role for architecture.

Involvement

In opposition to architecture as formal design, these architects repeat like a mantra the need to be 'involved'. The architect leaves the office and becomes a seismographer who locates and identifies existing practices, interests and needs. Their work becomes the investigation of the issues of the city at first hand. They listen, get engaged with the local population, and try to grasp all possible interpretations. The words of Aldo Van Eyck resound like a distant echo:

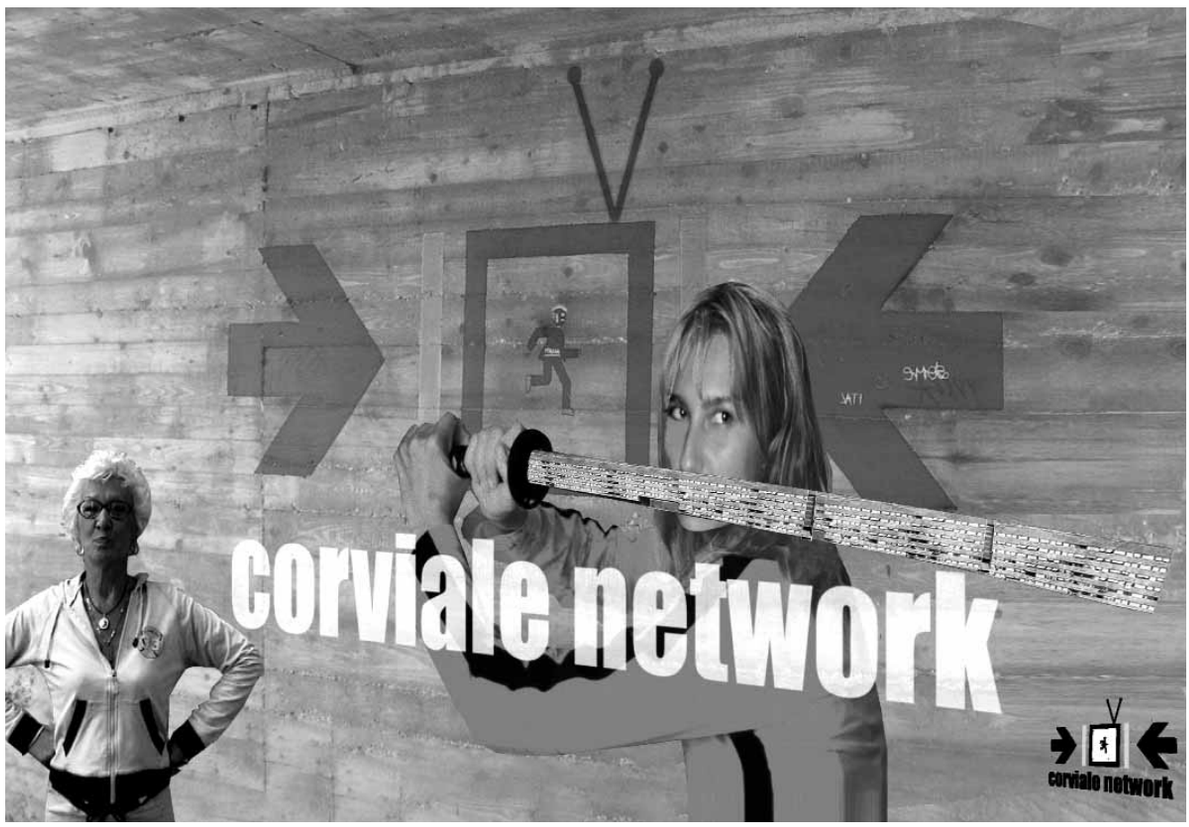
> *'Can architects meet society's plural demand? [...] In what are people to participate in fashioning their own immediate surroundings within a conceived overall framework? You see, when one says, "city" one implies the "people" in it, not just "population". This is the first problem confronting the architect-urbanist today.'*[1]

But those same questions today are being given different answers. Collectives like the Italian Stalker group or the Mexican-American Estudio Teddy Cruz



1 Lucciole a Corviale, in Immaginare Corviale, a project by Stalker/ON that engages with a one-kilometre-long housing complex in Rome

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are beginning to question their context and the people that inhabit it, to understand the priorities they need to concentrate on *[2]*. These investigations are embodied in projects both in terms of constructions and intangible actions, events aimed at affecting people's sensibility and taking a first step towards change. They are engaged in projects in which they consider involvement with the local community a resource in defining new connections and creating bridges. They create a variety of opinions thanks to the involvement of people who represent other disciplines. And the projects may even take the form of simple educational programmes capable of stimulating a new sensibility to and understanding of the urban dynamics, as in the work of the Centre for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), in New York City *[3]*.

The work of CUP grows out of a belief that 'the power of imagination is central to the practice of democracy, and that the work of governing must engage the dreams and visions of its citizens'.[2] To develop an understanding of our urban realm and to bridge the gap between the community and politicians, CUP proposes a wide range of tools and strategies, which include educational programmes, panel discussions, walking tours and media campaigns in many forms. Since 1997 CUP has conducted educational projects about places and how they change, bringing together art and design professionals with community-based advocates and researchers. Their projects in their own city, New York, and other American cities have the ambition to teach us to understand urban dynamics, to develop a critical sense and active involvement to bring about change. The aim of CUP is to foster a new awareness and stimulate a creative intervention as a collective practice accessible to all citizens.

On a more international level there are groups that are trying to provoke worldwide attention on issues that are strongly related to architecture but are mostly neglected by conventional practice. The Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory (FAST) is dedicated to exposing the global abuses of ideological planning, and aims to empower local populations through spatial planning *[4]*. The foundation, with its headquarters in Amsterdam, intervenes in cases where governments or situations of urban planning have created constraints on the local population through anti-libertarian laws and oppressive spatial interventions. Their work involves raising the awareness of inhabitants to their situation; it aims to think together with them about how to improve their living conditions and how to translate these ambitions into alternative plans. The study of specific conditions is accompanied by international campaigns of denunciation and projects aimed at enhancing the living conditions of local populations. Each of the group's actions seeks to promote alternative methods of urban planning, in which an understanding of local issues is developed through the active involvement of the population and adopts methods of negotiation or tactics embodying 'architectural survival techniques' that are capable of stimulating a sense of appropriation and creative responses.

Mediating strategies

These practices demonstrate instances in which the architect is becoming more and more a strategist rather than a designer of buildings. The work of

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2 Corviale Network, in Immaginare Corviale, Stalker/ ON

3 Who runs New York City Housing Authority? Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)

4 Hotel Abkhazia, Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory (FAST)

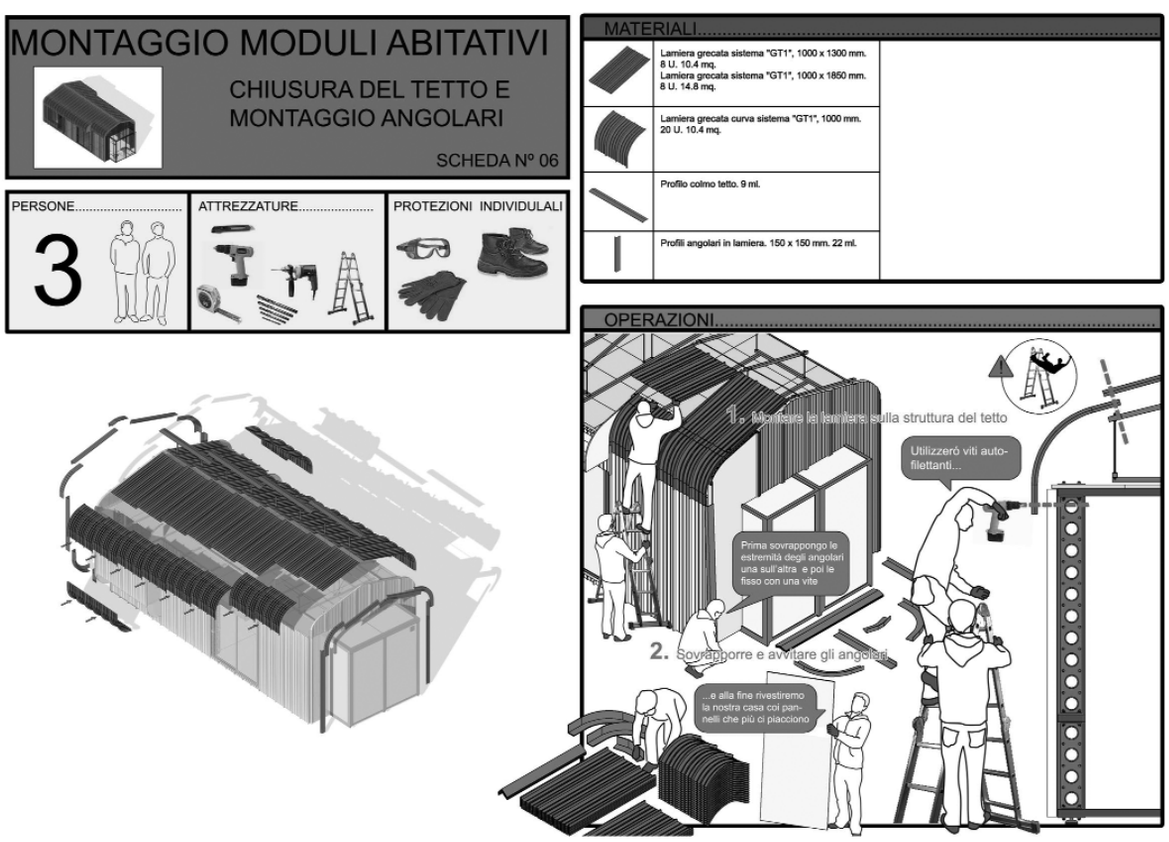
these groups is to develop long-term strategies and intervention tactics to sensitise people, enable them and push them to embody a new attitude. In such campaigns the work of Santiago Cirugeda is particularly effective. Cirugeda's mission is to 'work from the citizen's point of view', and with this ambition he is developing subversive actions to raise media attention on two main aspects: the progressive reduction of the public sphere of our cities; and the segregation of less wealthy people, who can't afford to live downtown, in distant peripheral neighbourhoods. Each project, in terms of housing or community spaces, is designed out of the needs of its users and built by the users themselves. In fact, the Seville-based architect is designing the instructions (in an Ikea easy-to-follow format), providing cheap building materials and legal assistance, while the final users will be building their own squat houses and community centres. His proposals consist of perpetually redefining systems, in terms of urban planning and legislation, looking for possible legal loopholes and grey areas which allow the inhabitants freedom of action. From systematic occupation of unused public spaces, to the construction of prostheses on facades, patios, roofs and vacant lots, he negotiates legal and illegal zones. An interesting aspect is that, Cirugeda being an artist, his projects benefit from a peculiar legal status and as such are safeguarded by those same laws that he is trying to swindle.

Finally, I would like to dwell upon a particular project by Jeanne van Heeswijk in order to analyse more deeply the dynamics of this approach shared by the groups I have addressed *[5, 6]*. The work of Jeanne van Heeswijk is an example of how to define a methodological alternative to the present order of things. She is an artist who collaborates with architects and deals mainly with 'architecture' and the evolutionary processes of urban contexts. It should not surprise us that, by contrast with the crisis of the role of architecture when faced with the rapid metamorphosis of the city, art tends to give an immediate response to the emergencies of everyday life. Conversely it is interesting to note that architects like Raúl Cárdenas (Torolab) or Santiago Cirugeda have chosen the territory of art and the museum as platforms to express their position as activists, in their quest for a podium to reconsider the position of architecture in our society.

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5&6 **Roof House,**
Santiago Cirugeda –
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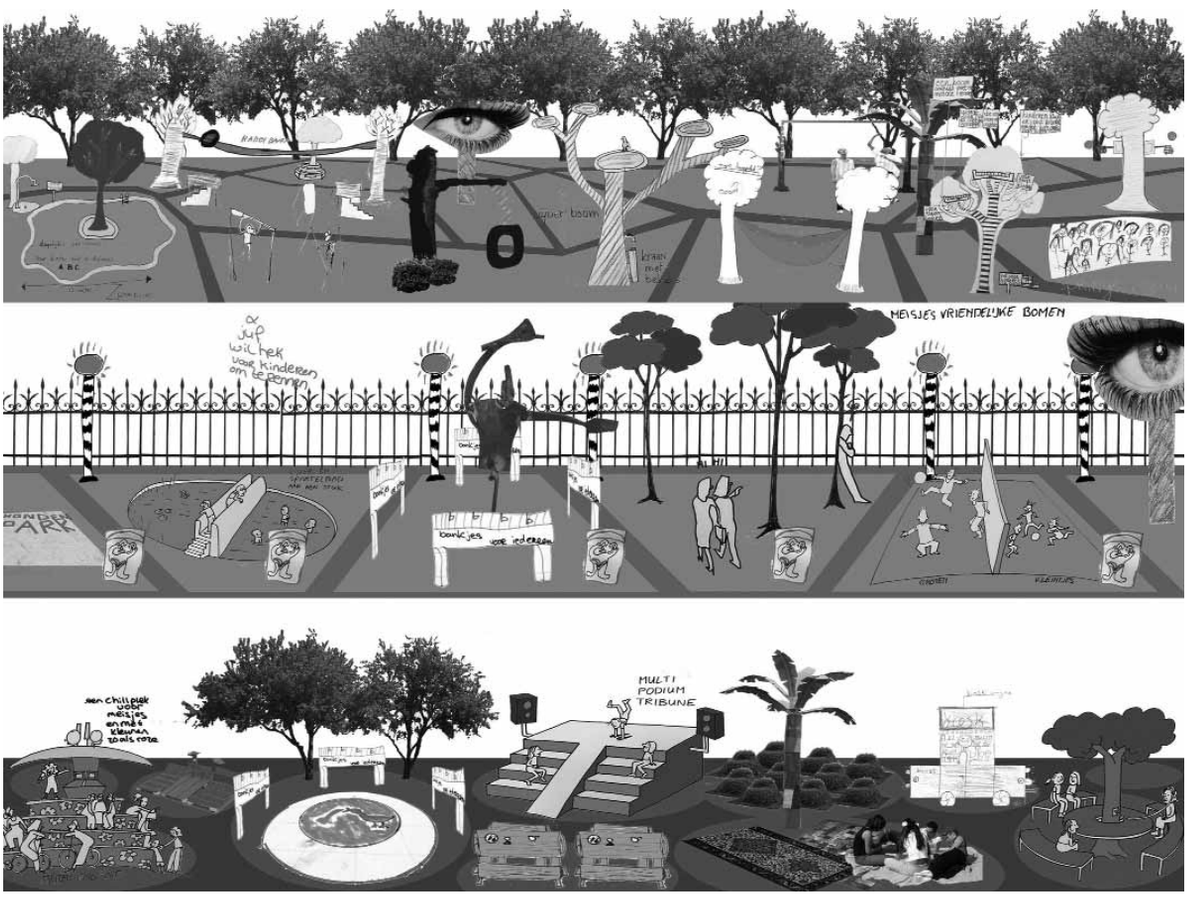
7&8 **Un-buildable House, Santiago Cirugeda – Recetas Urbanas**

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Van Heeswijk sees herself as a go-between, a mediator between situations, places and the people who inhabit them. Immersion, confrontation and communication are key concepts in her method of work. Her purpose is not so much to find solutions as 'to generate cultural models that do justice to, for instance, the complexity of the integration issue'.[3] Each approach to a place is a new experience every time. What is unchanging is the need to create an understanding of a given place and its dynamics and identify certain questions capable of creating a 'performative action'. It is because of this idealistic and committed character that Van Heeswijk's projects tend to be extremely stratified and prolonged in time. Her purpose is to identify a model; in many cases one that can be replicated and which is capable of supplying tools that allow people to develop their perceptions and set a process of change under way *[7, 8]*.

Shared space

In 2002 Van Heeswijk began to work on a project called Face Your World *[9, 10]*. This offers children a collective learning environment where they can learn how to investigate their living environment and at the same time alter it. 'Face Your World also provides a practical model for an urban planning process which stems from the profound involvement of local residents, and it strives to invest urban renewal tasks – usually realised on the basis of economic principles – with existing social and cultural capital.'[4] The project, developed at first in Columbus, Ohio (USA), offered children a collective learning environment, in which they could learn how to investigate their living environment as well as adapt it *[11, 12]*. It allowed children to engineer their surroundings, combining and re-using existing components in order to devise innovative visions of

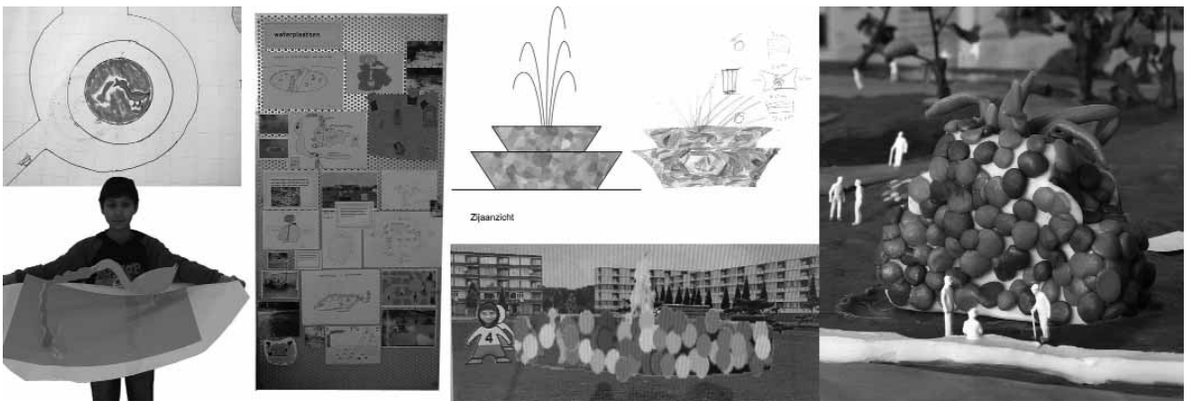


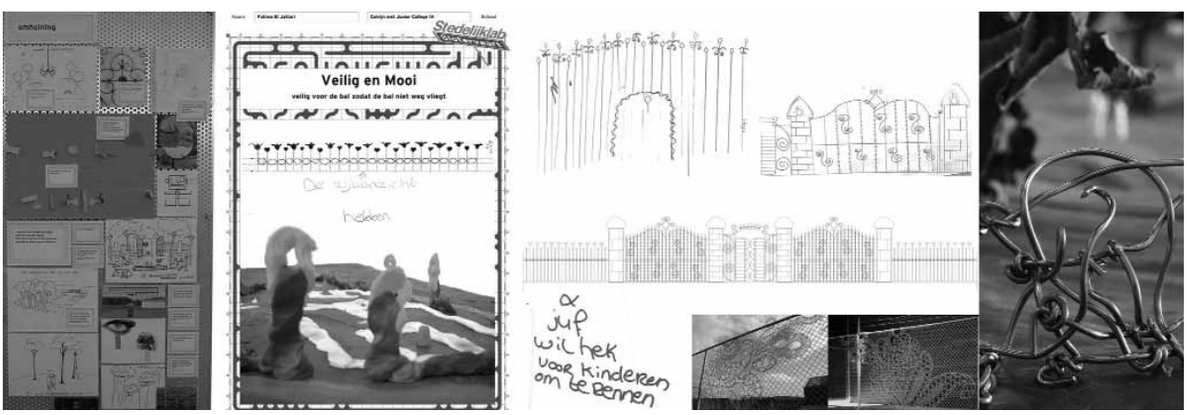
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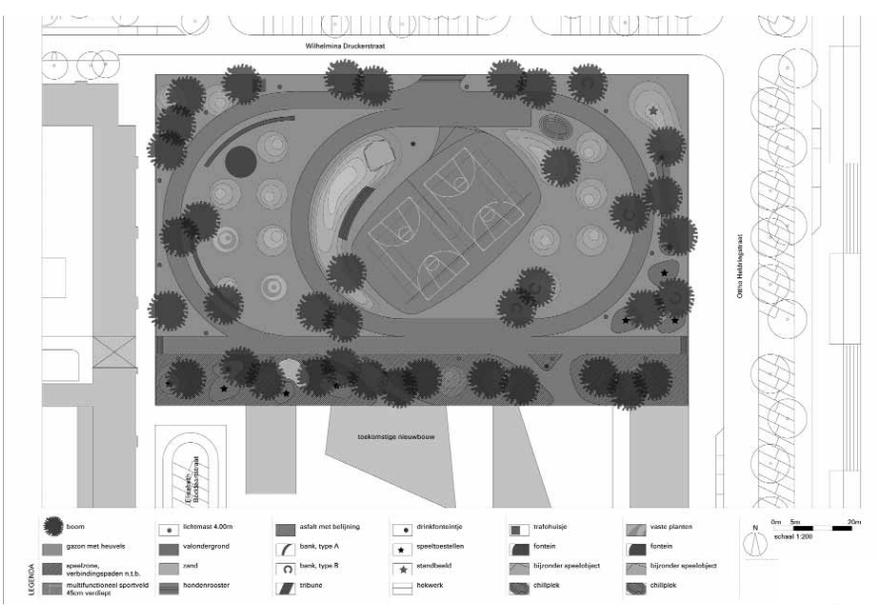
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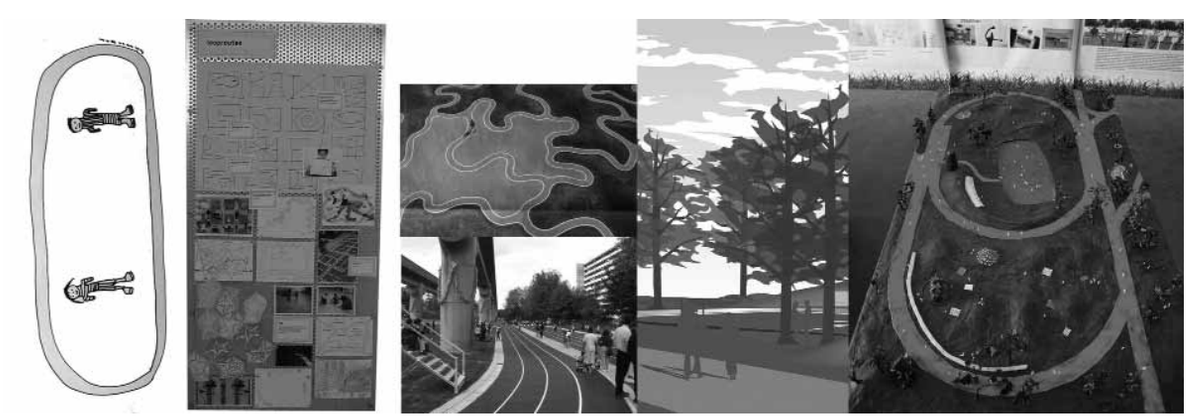


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9–13 Face Your World, Jeanne van Heeswijk & Dennis Kaspori



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their city. For the project, a city bus was transformed into a fully equipped digital lab and made available to groups of children. The participants could download images they made of their districts and alter them by using 3D software called *Interactor* developed in partnership with the V2_Lab in Rotterdam. This program enabled the children to perceive their city as a shared space in which they all live together, but also as an intricate network of different visions with which they have to negotiate.

Face Your World was subsequently developed in a second phase at Amsterdam's Slotervaart and a third at Rotterdam's Museumpark, both operations still under way. In these two phases Van Heeswijk began to work actively with an architect, Dennis Kaspori, who was already interested in developing theoretical open-source models in architecture,[5] and is now engaged in the front line as an activist with the aim of testing his theories. A recurrent feature of these projects is that they seek to encourage young people to develop a critical opinion about their own environment, and to show that their opinion is relevant. At the same time they also seek to stimulate young people to influence and participate in a process of urban renewal open to all citizens. Theirs is not an antagonistic model, but intended to apply a 'shared creative practice', in which the existing reality is questioned through different interpretations allowing a model of 'Creative Urbanism' to be established. This is a step beyond the examples of participatory architecture much in vogue in the '60s and '70s in which architects would ask citizens for their ideas, and the form of participation practised by local authorities who would develop alternative versions of a project based on surveys. Face Your World is understood as a collective project in which the architect, the urban planner, the artist, the psycho-geographer and the designer are simply people in a position to supply certain instruments and mediate the relations between the people taking part *[13]*.

Exploring, sketching and consulting

Slotervaart is a satellite suburb of Amsterdam largely inhabited by immigrants from Morocco and Turkey. The idea was to develop a project for a park covering some 13 500m^2 and to ask the students of the Professor Einstein elementary school, the Calvijn secondary school and all the residents of Staalmanplein to take part. A gymnasium adjacent to the area was transformed into the centre of operations and called the Slotervaart Urban Lab. The design stage was divided into three phases covering 27 weeks: 'exploring' (getting to know the neighbourhood and its users), 'sketching' (devising ideas and aspirations for change) and 'consulting' (discussions with others to create a collective understanding of place). Besides personal contacts with specialists, various instruments were developed to enable everyone to express their intuitions spatially. As in Ohio, *Interactor* was used to enable youngsters to rebuild their world using their own imagination, creativity and arguments and comparing their various ideas. But other more direct methods were also used, like drawing the surface of the park on the floor on a scale of 1:5 and using a 30cm ruler as the children's unit of measurement.

On 1 March 2006, the District Council approved the plan developed by Face Your World Slotervaart and scheduled completion of the project for mid-2009. The project is an interesting fusion of multiple spaces and functions. The first level is the landscape, divided into three sectors by a running track, within which the first sector is a playground zone adjacent to a school, the second sector is the rest zone (a quiet section with much ornamental greenery, benches and a fountain) and the third sector is the activity zone. To these are added a series of 'urban objects', multifunctional elements capable of satisfying the children's different needs (multi-podium, climbing wall, chilling area, a supervisor post to ensure safety, 'to-do trees', and many other items). The final project is an intriguing garden of wonders, in which everyone can find a space, but above all a park of inventions where each wish is fulfilled by being fused with the wishes of others. The project is proceeding with the Slotervaart Urban Workshop; the final phase planned to follow the construction and maintenance of the park but above all devised as a prototype model based on training and work to stimulate cultural self-awareness.

Basically the process is endless, beginning again each time with a new 'immersion, followed by sketching, discussing, merging', in a sort of loop. Van Heeswijk defines this model an 'entropic field of action' which seeks to stimulate the imagination, closely related to the real world, in contrast with fantasy. But she promptly adds: 'The field can be perfectly concrete, it can even be a football field!' In this case the architect's function is like that of an enzyme; a protein that catalyses chemical reactions, stimulates a process, or as Van Heeswijk would say, 'challenges the process'. We could compare the complexity of our society to biological processes. '[Enzymes are ...] proteins, synthesized in cells, which act as catalysts, causing all the body's chemical processes to advance with the necessary rapidity and completeness. Enzymes are ubiquitous in body cells and fluids, and they are specific – each enzyme is responsible for catalyzing one particular chemical process.'[6] But it does more than an enzyme, because it installs a form of reciprocity, an exchange of knowledge, collectivisation and cohabitation of the process. The result depends on trusting people, respecting their interpretations, considering them active players, but also depends on the need to stimulate them and give them the right role.

Ultimately, there is an important lesson to be learnt from the work of Jeanne van Heeswijk and Dennis Kaspori, as in that of numerous other groups engaged in redefining the role of architecture: architecture can be defined as an instrument for legitimising people's role in our society. Like an enzyme inside the human body, the architect has to identify the processes that need stimulation or correct its general functioning. Each action is like a new green shoot that helps establish a bottom-up approach to urban planning and design: it is the first step towards the construction of a better world.

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Notes

1. Aldo van Eyck, 'Team 10 Primer 1953-62', *Architectural Design,* ed. by Alison Smithson (December 1962), p. 564.
2. CUP, <http://anothercup development.org/> [accessed 5 August 2007].
3. Monica Narula, 'Interview with Jeanne Heeswijk', <http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/atelier/2004-July/000137.html> [accessed 3 September 2007].
4. Dennis Kaspori, 'Face Your World', <http://www.skor.nl/article-2640-en.html> [accessed 17 September 2007].
5. Dennis Kaspori, 'A Communism of Ideas', *Archis*, 3 (2003) <http://pro.archis.org/plain/object.php?object=738&year=&num=> [accessed 17 September 2007].
6. The Oxford Companion to the Body, *Enzymes*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?entry=t128.e329&srn=2&ssid=627698976#FIRSTHIT> [accessed 2 May 2008].

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Foundation for Achieving Seamless Territory (FAST), photo by D. J. Visser, 4
Stalker/Osservatorio Nomade, 1, 2
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Santiago Cirugeda – Recetas Urbanas, 5–8

Biography

Emiliano Gandolfi is an architect and curator with specific interests in art and architecture. Currently he is curator of the Italian Pavilion of the Biennale in Venice. As a writer and critic he is contributor to several magazines and publications; he was recently the editor of *Spectacular City* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2006).

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