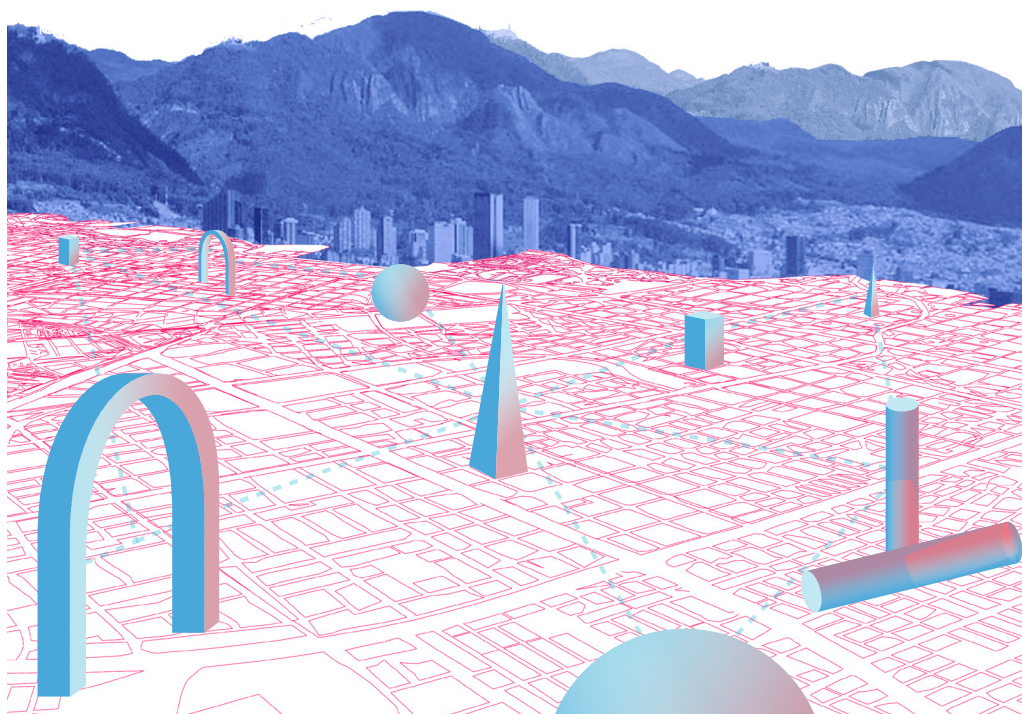Informal Networks – Project Development and Reflection

Emilia Golebiewska | 4736982

0. Collaborative Framework

The theoretical and contextual framework for this project has been developed in collaboration with Robert Stubbs. The decision to work together has been made due to very similar research interests, and the belief that while working together we can devote more time and attention to the project, producing a more in-depth research.

The outcome of the research has resulted in a jointly developed network of interventions, meant to loosely work together as a whole, but which could also be read independently. As such, moving towards the design of the project, we have decided to split up and work individually on producing detailed designs on separate sites – two for myself and two for Robert. The location of the sites, as well as the reasoning behind each intervention will be explained in detail further on in this paper.

Because of the collaborative nature of the project, a collective 'we' has been used to explain the development and nature of the project, as well as to reflect on the process as a whole.

1. Introduction

The time we have spent in Colombia has been marked by the continuous presence of informal actors, who were occupying public space and appropriating the city infrastructure to make a living. The presence of informal actors – street vendors, cleaners, homeless, waste collectors, sex workers – has made us re-evaluate how we approach the analysis of an unknown city and to whom we pay attention when assessing the openness of any given public space.

We could, of course, focus on analyzing the built environment, on examining the housing types and urban planning structures purely in terms of their architectural merit. Because, however, our interest has been sparked by the informal actors operating within the city of Bogotá, we have felt that there was need to analyze how they move across and interact with the city.

Informal actors possess a practical knowledge of the city, a sort of 'secret know-how', of how to move and operate in an environment that is unwelcoming to them. How could this knowledge be used as a tool or input of urban design? By considering the knowledge and ways of operating of the informal actors in a city, we have moved away from the 'designing for' informality, and more towards 'designing through' informality – incorporating the elements that we have observed in the interaction between informal actors and city infrastructure into the finished, non-prescriptive and multi-functional city interventions. Non-prescriptive, here, means spaces that are sensitive to the movement and way of living of its users.

By incorporating that knowledge, we are hoping to create spaces of increased number of opportunities and affordances, and as such, to give voice to the informal, marginalized actors in the city, that are often dismissed and excluded.

2. Conceptual and Contextual Development

This section will outline the conceptual development of the project, which stemmed as a direct response to the contextual analysis done in- and post-situ. The project took many turns and explored several avenues, each new decision and path being based on the material previously researched and analyzed. It is worth, then, to spend some time and attention on each of the steps taken towards the final project proposal, to show the progression of our analysis in a clear and somewhat concise way.

2.1. Disciplinary Analysis of Vending Practices in Bogotá, Colombia

The project has initially started out as a disciplinary research with the aim to understand the informal vending practices present in Bogotá, Colombia. The interest into these informal practices stemmed from two things. One of them was the undeniable and unavoidable presence of informal actors in the city. The other was the desire to understand the social, economic, and cultural landscape of Bogotá, in order to decipher how these informal actors inscribe themselves into the life of the city.

Another, not insignificant, aspect which made the research into informal practices particularly worthwhile, is the alternative economic system introduced by these practices into the city. This is not to say that the informal economies present in Bogotá are in any way the South American equivalent to the gentrified organic market trend that is present in so many European cities. The realities present in Bogotá and other Colombian cities are not about choice but necessity. Nonetheless, despite forced nature of the practice (be it by circumstance, family, societal structures or political situation), the informal vending economy present in the city carries with it a level of complexity that can only come from a certain degree of organization. This is not to imply that there has been an organizing body among the street vendors of Bogotá, but rather that there is a set of unwritten rules and types of knowledge that allows these informal actors to effectively operate within the city and find opportunities within the unwelcoming, exclusionary urban infrastructure, turning the less-than-ideal situation to their advantage.

Our understanding of the informal actors present in the city has also been informed by Felipe Hernandez, who in *Bhabha for Architects,* writes:

"(…) such [western] methods of historical inscription dismiss the architectures produced by common people in the act of survival. By this I mean the architectures of poor people in slums, squatter settlements and, also, the appropriations of space that they carry out in the centres of cities in order to live and work, to survive in a world-system that is adverse to poverty. These architectures may not correspond in any way with the referential system used to judge architectural production around the world, but it does respond to the realities and complex needs of minority peoples who live on the margins of culture, between social classes and economic strata and, in many cases, completely outside the axis of global capitalism."[1]

We recognize that the informal actors, through the act of appropriating and occupying public space, disrupt the order of the hegemonic city, introducing elements of discomfort, otherness and freedom into the static life of the metropolis. Their nature is transient and flexible, their way of navigating the urban infrastructure carrying a knowledge of how to spot and appropriate the opportunities within it. We felt that the best way to approach our research was to use methods which would allow

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[1] Felipe Hernández, *Bhabha for Architects*, Thinkers for Architects 04 (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 18.

us to understand people and their relationship to space, rather than space itself; to understand people through the objects that they use to appropriate the city.

As such, we have tried to carry out our analysis twofold – considering both the very physical aspects of the informal actors' presence in the city, as well as the more ephemeral nature of their daily life. We wanted to treat both of these subjects with the seriousness that they deserve; to consider informal mobile constructions in architectural terms and evaluate them with the same amount of attention as one would analyze a building.
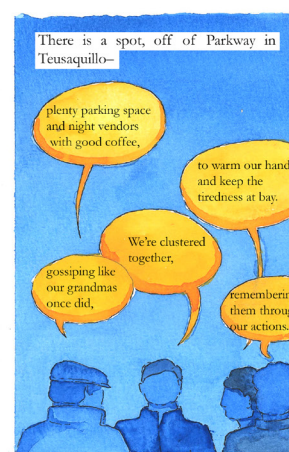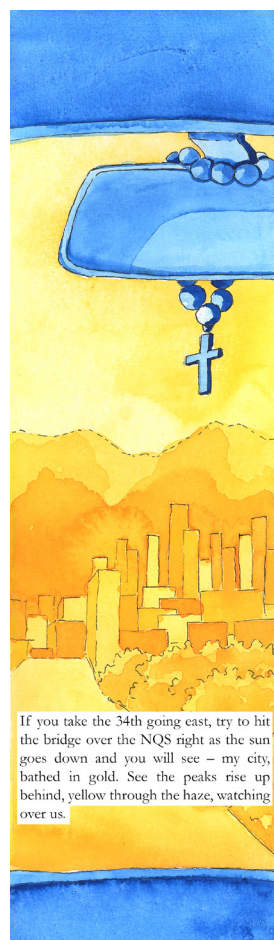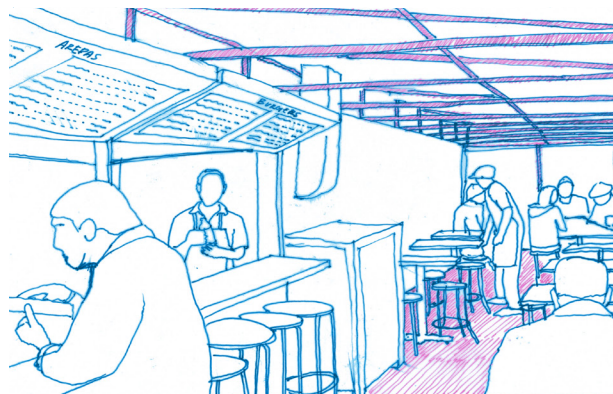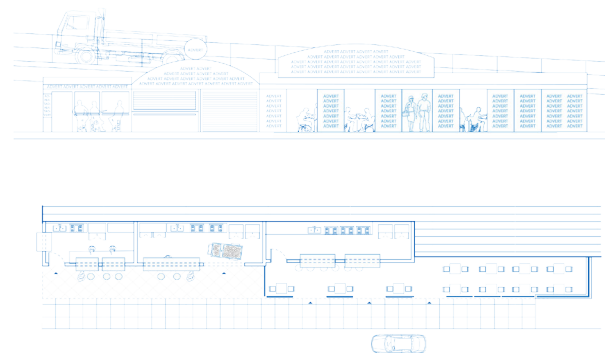
2.1.1. Research Methods: Using Narrative and Material Culture as Tools for Analysis

Over the course of the project, we have used a collection of on- and off-site techniques to perform contextual analysis of Bogotá. The in-situ process included the workshop 'thinking through things' which has challenged us to reconsider how objects can be used in analytical research, by transferring the agency from ourselves and into the objects that we wield. This process of exploration through objects forced us to cleanse ourselves of any assumptions that we might have had regarding the site, and to approach it 'as found' by analyzing it on its own merits. This ethnographic method of research shaped the way we developed our understanding of the site by placing ourselves at a more local point of view, through participating in acts of appropriation with our objects. It has also allowed us to understand the ways of appropriating that are practiced by the informal actors who interact with the city's infrastructure every day.

Off-site, to further understand these processes of appropriation, we have utilized a strategy similar to the one of Ray Lucas' study of Namdaemun market in South Korea. By using different types of architectural drawings – plan, elevation, perspective – we have tried to treat informal architectures with the same amount of seriousness as we would study a building, recognizing them as equally important to the production of the city.

Due to time constraints, language barrier and the majority of the work being done off-site, our ability to interact with the people operating in the public spaces of Bogotá was extremely limited. Having analyzed the physical realities of informal actors to the best of our ability, we were now looking to explore the temporal and flexible nature of their presence in the city. The literary narrative was a device we have used to this end, enabling us to understand spaces from a distance and make the way they are experienced more legible.

Learning about things and places experientially allows us to imagine what living in that place is actually like, and helps to understand change; to analyze variables that are not fixed to a given location or time. This is particularly useful when considering informal actors such as street vendors, who are constantly moving with the flows of city life. Similarly to the 'thinking through things' exercise, it helps us as researchers to look at a given environment from the viewpoint of the actors that inhabit and use it, and thus - to empathize with them. The narratives, partially based on observation and partially imagined, have allowed us to understand the delicate push and pull of making a living on the street, of navigating the flows of human traffic, of the opportunities and affordances present in the urban infrastructure of the city.

If you take the 34th going east, try to hit the bridge over the NQS right as the sun goes down and you will see – my city, bathed in gold. See the peaks rise up behind, yellow through the haze, watching over us.

At night we gather.

There is a spot, off of Parkway in Teusaquillo–

plenty parking space and night vendors with good coffee,

to warm our hands and keep the tiredness at bay.

We're clustered together,

gossiping like our grandmas once did,

remembering them through our actions.

4

2.2. Historical Exclusion

While observing the ways the informal actors operated within a city, as well as contrasting our experience of it with the knowledge we have of the European city structure, we have noticed a certain lack within the urban tissue of Bogotá. Informal actors seem to be largely excluded from the city planning schemes, with public spaces of the city designed to be uncooperative at best, and unwelcoming at worst, towards 'other' ways of occupying the city.

Historically, this exclusion has taken place since the introduction of the Spanish colonial grid in the late 16th century. The rigid structure of the grid, with very clearly defined borders and strict hierarchy, was not open towards difference. The organization of the city was a means of imposing the colonial power structures on the inhabitants of the city. This imposed order resulted in the segregation of indigenous populations to live outside of the grid, in the outskirts of the city, causing them to be ignored and very often not historicized at all.[2]

This situation has persisted to this day, in different shapes and forms. One of the most striking exclusionary practices exercised by the modern city, is the attempted clearing out of the informal actors – in this case, street vendors – from the streets and into newly constructed centros commerciales, which results in severely diminishing the income of the vendors and thus contributing to the difficulties of their daily life. The image of the informal actors has also deteriorated in the eyes of the public:

"(...) [T]he media, politicians, and many Bogotanos aligned street vendors with "crooks" and "mafiosos" and used this depiction as justification to evict, relocate, police, and clear plazas. (…) In the end, the recuperation of public space projects became a double-edged sword; providing Bogotanos with better mobility and recreational areas at the cost of disenfranchising hundreds of failed relocated vendors."[3]

The presence of informal actors in a city like Bogotá is unavoidable and is a signifier of socio-economic problems that cannot be solved by architecture. Concluding our research into the historical context of the city, as well as having analysed the daily spatial practices of the informal vendors, we have started to look into ways of reintroducing inclusivity into the public spaces of Bogotá.

2.3. Right to the City and Multiplicity of Function

To understand our observations within a theoretical framework of reference, we have relied on the writings of David Harvey on public space. According to Harvey, to understand the production of urban space, we need to understand how human activity and social practices influence the nature of space and its forms.[4]

We have tried to understand these processes in our investigation into informal practices in Bogotá. Our observations have raised questions of ownership and belonging. Who uses public space? For whom it was designed? We have felt there was a lack of accommodation of otherness within the design of urban public spaces, informal practices were excluded in design through the lack of provisions. Informality, otherness and difference is as crucial to the functioning of the city as

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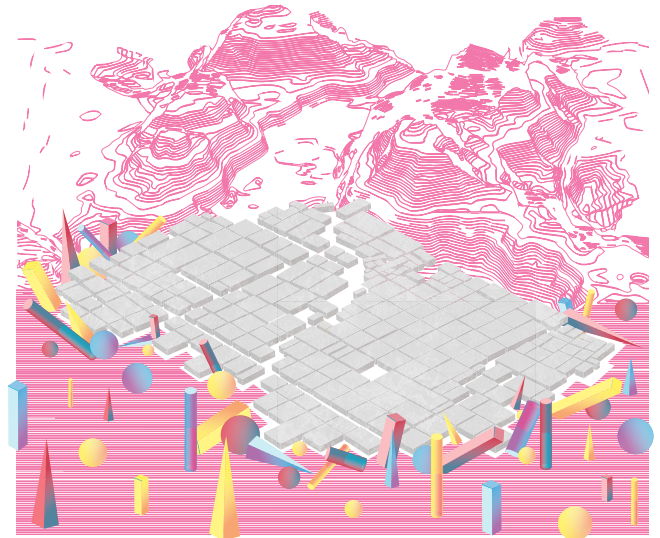
[2] Felipe Hernández, Peter Kellett, and Lea K. Allen, eds., *Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America*, Remapping Cultural History, v. 11 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 3–4.
[3] Michael G. Donovan, "Space Wars in Bogotá: The Recovery of Public Space and Its Impact on Street Vendors." (2002), 120.
[4] David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 14.

infrastructure or public transport, and yet it is summarily ignored and omitted in city planning.

Hence the need for inclusiveness. Again after Harvey – "[e]verything depends on who gets to fill [the city] with meaning. The financiers and developers can claim it, and have every right to do so. But then so can the homeless and the sans-papiers. We inevitably have to confront the question of whose rights are being identified (…). Only when it is understood that those who build and sustain urban life have a primary claim to that which they have produced, and that one of their claims is to the unalienated right to make a city more after their own heart's desire, will we arrive at a politics of the urban that will make sense."[5]

The underlaying thread running throughout the project, in all its iterations, was the belief that to invite difference is to enrich the environment, to provide more opportunities for sharing and exchanging all types of knowledges. The space for this exchange, then, should be changeable and accommodating, offering a wide range of uses and possibilities; "both collective and non-commodified."[6]

What follows, then, is the need to design spaces of openness, and inclusivity; ones that can be enabling without being prescriptive. In other words, following Laplantine, spaces that contain multiplicities – exploring the acts of "forming, deforming, transforming, (…) not accumulation (…), but tension."[7] The aim of these spaces is to explore this tension, the careful balance between the informal and formal and react to it, proposing new infrastructures. Gestures of formalizing the informal must be avoided, carrying with them the danger of creating a beautified version of the before mentioned 'centros comerciales'. As such, the design should not attempt to provide any kind of solutions, but rather propose a gathering space for different kinds of users, encourage different types of uses and open a platform for exchange. The other, underlaying purpose of these public spaces is to provide an increased amount of opportunities for informal actors. These opportunities can be subtle and invisible to the untrained eye; as a design gesture, they are meant as a sign of welcome.

3. *Design of the Interventions*

The research has culminated in the design of four interventions, each of them situated in the neighborhood of Teusaquillo, Bogotá. The locations were chosen based on several criteria. One of the main prerogatives was to operate in areas already occupied by informal vendors, but which had no provisions for them. The idea was to avoid the assumption that providing a space for informality would automatically attract such activity to it, but rather to intervene in places that are already occupied.

Another consideration taken into account when choosing sites for interventions were the types of spaces present across the city. Incorporating the knowledge we have gained from studying the colonial masterplan, as well as plans of other cities (both based on a grid system and ones that grew organically), we have chosen specific locations that are repeated across the city, nondescript but open enough to accommodate informal actors, and that could form a basis for further interventions. These locations were: the plaza, the intersection, the park and the empty lot within a block.
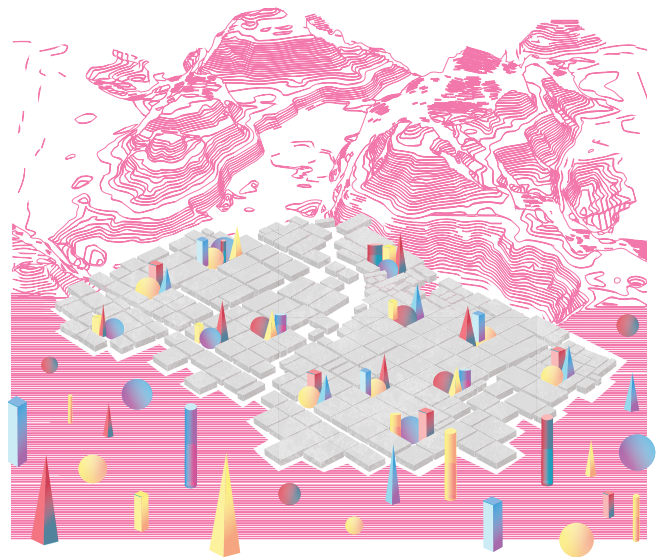
[5] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2012), pp.xv-xvi.
[6] Harvey, 73.
[7] François Laplantine, *The Life of the Senses: Introduction to a Modal Anthropology*, Sensory Studies Series (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 14.

The four planned interventions are meant to be performative, active spaces, incorporating community event spaces, as well as an increased amount of opportunities for informal actors. The four designs aim at introducing spaces of gathering and communal action, that are welcoming of otherness and incorporate the ways of operating of informal actors.

These four interventions are: the recycling centre and community garden; the woodworking workshop; the observation tower; and the performance plaza. Having split the project into two parts, Robert Stubbs focused on the centre and workhop, as the more active, enclosed spaces, while I worked on the observation tower situated at the intersection near the end of Park Way, and the performance plaza at the entrance of Universidad Nacional. The centre and workshop lean towards more defined boundaries of function and rely less on their users for the interpretation of their meaning. The tower and plaza, on the other hand, become truly performative only once engaged directly – through the actions of climbing, performing, resting or drinking – these spaces transform from being passive into active objects.

Very briefly, the university plaza is meant to provide small, scattered performance spaces, to be used by both university students and street performers. The new layout of the plaza is intended to encourage resting and pausing, by providing multiple different seating areas and arrangements. The design also incorporates features that informal vendors can use to settle into the plaza more comfortably during their working time. By allowing the performance spaces to be open to the public, equal amount of importance is given to informal street performers, as well as more organized university productions – the stages are inclusive and shared.

The observation tower, in turn, is meant to provide a vantage point above the street level which is usually inaccessible to informal actors. Open to the public, it provides both shelter and resting space among its terraces. The purpose of the tower is threefold. One, as mentioned, to provide a new, unexplored vantage point. Two, is for the tower to act in a way similar to a landmark – visible from a distance and intriguing for the citizens. And lastly, three – acting on the dichotomy between observing something from a distance and actively interacting with it in close proximity, the tower offers a source of potable water at its feet, for pedestrians and informal actors alike.

4. A Continuous Loop – Relationship Between Research and Design in Relation to the Position of Methods and Analysis Studio

During the course of the project, design and research have been inseparable. There was no particular moment in which the 'research' part of the graduation project stopped, and design began. Since September we have been on a continuous loop of researching and designing, with the research constantly influencing – and subsequently changing – the design.

The continuous loop of research and design is also subscribing into the ethos of the Methods and Analysis studio. The on-going research allows for more experimentation in ways of designing. It has also allowed us to change tracks dramatically over the course of the project, incorporating the shifts in our understanding of the context.

The proposed interventions also respond to the questions posed by the studio regarding the commonality of the built environment and using knowledge as a resource. Through introducing the mixed bottom-up approach we have tried to create a participatory way of designing, one

that would allow many voices to be heard. The ideas adapted from Harvey, of enriching the conversations happening in public space through difference, also reflect on the idea of a collective production of 'commons', here understood as malleable, open spaces within the urban infrastructure.

Through the study of the informal practices in Bogotá we have also tried to incorporate and legitimize different types of knowledge of the city, one that cannot be taught in class. As architects, we have been trained in extremely specific ways of looking at the built environment. By focusing our attention on the informal actors we discovered aspects of the city previously omitted – which walls, curbs, and steps are high enough to be used as seating? Which overhang is wide enough to provide shelter? Which sign or light is slim but sturdy enough to chain a cart onto? These knowledges are a different way of understanding a city, and ones that we hoped to incorporate and encourage within our designs.

Regarding the larger context of architectural practice, during the course of the project we have established ourselves firmly within the tradition of participatory, community led interventions that are responsive to given context and invite multiple interpretations and ways of using.

5. A Transferable Framework?

The idea of an architectural project being transferable is questionable. It is not so much that the proposals themselves are transferable, or that even the proposed structures are in any way universal, but rather the way of approaching the context and the social layers that could possibly be applicable elsewhere.

Architecture doesn't – it cannot – solve the very visible problems of any given society. There is no magic formula which could be replicated across the world in different contexts or cities. We have tried to do this in the early stages of the project, looking at city plans across centuries and continents, trying to distill the perfect combination of features which would produce the 'good' city – replacing one masterplan with another. We have failed horribly.

After this, what we have tried to do during the remaining time of the project's development, was to approach the context in the most careful and considered way possible. It is not so much that we have proposed a set of variables that could be mixed and matched as one pleases and produce in the end a spectacular, 'community-led' design. Rather, we have tried to consider ways of working on a sensitive subject in an unfamiliar context, trying out different forms of engagement as a way of designing. In the end we have chosen to subscribe to the tradition of more grassroots approach, which includes the participation of local communities and councils.

We have spent a lot of time and attention on trying to make the project as socially responsible and delicate as possible. Spending a lot of time on analyzing the context in which we are meant to design, in trying to understand the relationship between public space and its users within the realities of Bogotá, we have tried to come up with a proposal for a strategy of designing, rather than a fixed approach. This is to say that rather than proposing a model for designing in an urban context, we are proposing a model of *looking at* urban context and its inhabitants, which then leads to a responsive, flexible design.

This model, of considering the ways in which citizens peruse public space, the way in which they adapt the space to themselves or adapt themselves to space, the ways in which public space is – or isn't –

welcoming of otherness, is the social and professional framework in which we have chosen to operate. It is this framework, rather than the proposed intervention designs themselves, that could be applied to other contexts.

6. Social and Ethical Considerations During the Course of the Project

There were several ethical dilemmas that we have encountered during the development of our project. One of the very first concerns that we had to face was the simple fact of us being two students, educated within a Western context (both European and North American), trying to develop a project located in Colombia, in South America. When signing up for the studio of Methods and Analysis we have, of course, known that we will be placed within an unfamiliar context.

Questions arose – what right do we, with our cultural context and specific identities, have to design an architectural project in the South American context? What is our relationship to Colombia's colonial past and how can we propose an intervention which would not be in any way judgmental or patronizing? Even within the limits of an academic exercise, which would bear no effect on the reality of Bogotá, the responsibility that we have as designers, and that we hope to carry forward as we move towards embarking on our professional career, is to approach any context with the utmost care and respect that it deserves.

After returning from the field trip, the questions regarding our position towards designing in the given context only multiplied. As outlined in previous paragraphs, while in Colombia, our attention was captured by the presence of informal actors on every major street in Bogotá. The sheer number of street vendors in the city is overwhelming – it is impossible to overlook them and yet, from what we could see while investigating the city, the urban infrastructure of Bogotá does not account for their presence. With good intentions, we have decided to focus our graduation project on understanding how these informal vendors operate and on proposing the design with the informal vendors as a main source of inspiration and as the main user.

During the course of the project we have oscillated between extremes – from a top-down urban masterplan, to a completely bottom-up small initiatives. The top-down approach wasn't considerate enough of the realities of the informal actors in Bogotá, and was a response that was too out of proportion to be taken seriously within the framework of the investigation. The completely bottom-up approach relied too heavily on the imagined narratives of potential users – using them more as justifications of certain design decisions, rather than as a way of empathizing and exploring.

In the end, we have settled on something in-between. As mentioned before, the socio-economic situation of Bogotá, of which the informal actors are victim and signifier, cannot be remedied by an architectural intervention. As such, our response could not be based purely on the provision of amenities, at the risk of creating a project that is prescriptive. The resolution to create spaces of gathering, with an increased number of infrastructural opportunities, and carrying a symbolic meaning was our attempt at creating architecture that is respectful and sensitive to its environment. The mix of bottom-up and council led approach also lends some legitimacy to our proposal, with real-world organizations that could be a part of the project if it ever came to reality. The final decision for the four interventions to contain functions for both the informal actors, as well as the residents of the neighborhood of Teusaquillo or any passer-

by that might be present, hopes to ensure that through including one type of user, the design does not exclude another.

7.   General Reflection

Working on this project throughout the course of the year presented several challenges. The combination of working in an unfamiliar environment, along with the sensitivity required to address the question of informality and its presence in the city. At times, the challenge seemed so great that it reduces us to inaction – there were numerous moments when we felt we couldn't move forward with the project and had to adjust both our expectations and the conceptual and disciplinary research carried out to support the project.

The process of trial and error, however, did not entirely go to waste, for which we are thankful. In every avenue that was explored and ultimately discarded, we have found something to retain and reinterpret. Thank so this, I believe that we have arrived at project that is richer in understanding of how changes in the urban environment can affect space.

The site specific ways of working, the considerations of community participation and creating dignified architectural designs with very simple means, and the lesson that sometimes, less really is more (although perhaps this is not quite what Mies had in mind when he coined the phrase), is something that we hope to carry forward into our professional careers, as our position in practice.

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