Research Report

Informal Networks: Embracing Otherness through Performative Spaces

00 - INTRODUCTION

The research into this project has been developed jointly with Robby Stubbs. Together we have worked on establishing ways of intervening in Bogotá, Colombia and formed a small network of interventions operating within the same framework. The designs of the interventions were developed individually.

The city which we were researching, Bogotá, is one of contrasts. One of the most visible ones, which has struck me personally, was the one between the grand buildings visible in the distance, acting as landmarks, and the life that happens on street level – order contrasting seeming chaos. Having noticed this opposition, during our time in the city, the presence of informal actors was something that has interested us from the very beginning and was to remain our focus throughout the duration of the project.

By informal actors here, I mean the street vendors, cleaners, waste collectors, homeless and sex workers. Anyone who does not conform to the idea of a formalized way of living - by choice or circumstance and whose majority of time is spent on the city streets.

It must be said, that the research undertaken during our time in Bogota, are only observations, very impersonal in nature. Due to the limited knowledge of Spanish, as well as very tight time constraints, there was very little opportunity to actually interact with the people presented in the photographs.

Because of these limitations, and the deisre to understand and design for the informal actors in the most respectful way possible, we have mostly limited our interest to the street vendors, as we have perceived this group to be in the most direct relationship with city infrastructure, but also as the ones most easily understood through observation alone.

Our understanding of informal actors, and specifically street vendors, has also been informed by Felipe Hernandez, who has placed emphasis on the importance of informal architectures, and also has highlighted in his work the lack of historization of these informal practices.

"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]

The nature of the project development was not linear, and there were many things taking occurring simultaneously. Upon some reflection and looking back at the methods of investigation, I have decided to slightly reshuffle

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

the contents of the research, framing them in different ways than previously and I believe that this approach has given me some insights as to why some avenues of investigation didn't work out. This change also reflects the shifting – unfixed nature of the project itself.

In the past year, we have been using narratives, as a way of investigating the site and its inhabitants, as well as to explore the architecture we created. Due to time passed and distance separating us from Bogotá, the narratives also served as a way of experiencing the city once again.

Christine Boyer in her contribution to '*Strangely Familiar: narratives of architecture in the city*', mentions using narratives – in this case, cinematographic narratives – as a way to discover spaces which are no longer experienced directly. She writes:

"(…) such devices as the detective story (…) offer an illusion of reality in narrated form; they focus, point out and remember parts of the city that have been covered over by mysterious events. Thus, (...) [the film] offered a set of mapping procedures that presented an imaginary centered and legible city, enabling the spectator to gain at least cognitive control over a place that was no longer experienced directly."[2]

There have been three main narratives present throughout the project, each focusing on a different aspect of the research and subsequent proposal. They will shape the further structure of the presentation.

[2] Christine Boyer, "Twice-Told Stories: The Double Erasure of Times Square," in *Strangely Familiar Narratives of Architecture in the City*, ed. Iain Borden et al. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 41.

Following our initial research into the writings of Felipe Hernandez, we have set out to perform disciplinary analysis of vending practices that we have observed in Bogotá. For this, we picked a range of vending activities and vending objects in Teusaquillo.

Narratively, we have focused on the vending objects – writing out narratives from their perspective, trying to understand how they move through space, but also through time. As temporary, small mobile structures, they were unmoored and demanded more intangible ways of analysis.

But that was not enough to understand them. As architects, we drew – plans, elevations, sections and perspectives, to explore the spatial qualities of informal vending, as well as give them the legitimacy that disciplinary architectural analysis can grant. This analysis took inspiration from Ray Lucas' study of the stalls in the Namdaemun market in Seoul, South Korea, which was presented in his research book 'Graphic Anthropology'. The research he carried out aimed at understanding the relationship between the vending carts and the space they occupied.

The written narratives, and research that we have performed as modelled after Lucas were informative, but we felt were not comprehensive. They have forced us to consider different kinds of actions that informal vendors need to undertake to orientate themselves in the city. Where can they fit their carts? What do they use to shelter themselves? What do they use for security? These derivative actions were still centered around the idea of objects that are used by street vendors.

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.

We have then started looking into the historical reasons behind this exclusion, starting back from the colonial times and the initial Spanish colonial grid, which was used as a means of imposing governing power on the inhabitants of the city. Over time, the growth of the city blurred the grid, however the continuous push of marginalized communities to the outskirts has continued until today. Especially in the case of the vending community, who are very often shuffled into specially created centros commerciales, which offer much less opportunity for generating income.

After looking at historical urban planning of Bogotá, we began thinking about urban planning. We became fascinated with grids. Looking at different cities we tried to learn about ways of incorporating spaces of significance into the city fabric. We looked at cities that have grown organically, such as Venice, ones that had planning introduced at a later stage, like Rome, and ones that were planned from scratch on the basis of a grid – similar to Bogotá – such as Las Vegas and Washington DC.

Our biggest misstep during this period of investigation links back to the narratives that we have started with – we treated the city as an object to be played with. Clumsily, we have tried to incorporate what we have learnt within masterplanning proposals which were not successful.

What we have learnt from this, however, and what we retained during further design, are two, quite practical things. First, the relative distances between spaces of importance, what we could call pressure points, and second, that these spaces need to be read as relating to one another, to be of similar type to be read as a coherent whole.

We then began asking ourselves the question of who do we want to design for and for whom is the public space in Bogotá intended? How can we go about this? How does the coexistence of formal and informal living affect the built environment?

To further understand this relationship we have looked at the writings of David Harvey, who claims that to 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. He writes: "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."[3]

Informality, otherness and difference are as crucial to the functioning of the city as infrastructure or public transport, and yet they are summarily ignored and omitted in city planning. We don't believe that this should be the case and that the production of public space is affected by all the participants – formal or not. The driving question of the project then became the reconciliation of the designed and planned public space with the unstoppable force of informal practices. with the hope of creating spaces of coexistence, ones that would welcome difference and otherness. 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."

But how to understand this difference? Once again we turned to narratives, to imagine and explore the daily goings of these communities and to come up with alternatives to the masterplanning, top-down approaches of before. The project has now shifted in focus, from an object, to a person. We have relayed too much on this made up structure of other people's daily lives. While helpful in empathizing with informal actors, we have tried to use the graphic narrative as a means of justifying, rather than exploring, a bottom up approach to design and it has rang false for us. We have tried then to find a middle ground, between a bottom up and top down approaches to designing public spaces and interventions. We have settled on a mixed approach, which would in part rely on the backing of architects and municipality, but also include participation from the community.
Who are the actors involved in such a process? The architects, of course, and the municipality. The community itself – of both the neighbourhood inhabitants, and informal actors. Students, from a nearby university. Manual workers to aid construction and local media to help with publicity. Local art community and humanitarian or educational organisations, which might be interested in helping out.

To further ground our proposal in reality, we looked at real life organisations which could be interested in participating in the project

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[3] David Harvey, Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution (New York: Verso, 2012), pp.xv-xvi.

should it ever come to life. One of these was Escuela Taller, which is a social program aimed at training young people in various traditional crafts, including construction and woodworking. The programme has branches across most of south America.

We have looked at examples of this approach in architectural practice, with studios such as aaa, raumlabor in France and Germany, Architeqtura Expandida in Colombia, Comunal in Mexico and Rural Urban Framework in Hong Kong and China. It is important to note that all of these projects stemmed from community engagement and even if some of them were intended to aid local, often marginalized communities, they were not humanitarian architecture.

Having figured out how we propose to create these interventions, we set out to provide them with a social programme in line with our previous investigations. We wanted to move away from the passiveness and very often symbolic nature of open public spaces already present in the city. These spaces, often completely paved through, with little to no seating provided – like the San Victorino plaza, the Universidad Nacional entrance, Plaza Bolivar – are inactive and unwelcoming. With our interventions we wanted to reverse this trend, and have these spaces become performative and active.

It was also important to, while designing with informality and inclusiveness in mind, not exclude the general public. Hence the projects have multiple uses – both as community gathering spaces and as spaces which provide increased amount of opportunites for informal actors. 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 of knowledges. 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.

Taking into account all our previous research, which has been very focused on the micro scale, we wanted to once again look into an urban approach, and consider how to reintroduce inclusiveness in a city with an already established urban and social hierarchy. Instead of considering the city as an object, we tried to focus our urban approach on the people that inhabit it. The approach we considered is the concept of urban acupuncture.

A Kyle Miller theory, small scale healing 'spots' that have a ripple effect into the larger community and eventually at a larger urban scale, instead of proposing large scale redevelopment projects. Urban revitalization must occur first at local levels and involve local communities. This corresponds to our intention of focusing on groups which are usually not the priority in the eyes of the local planning office. Saskia de Wit writes: "the contemporary notion of urban acupuncture, a theory that focuses on urban 'pressure points' to create positive ripple effects affecting the entire community: if the needles are in the right spots, the effect on the entire body is considerable and beneficial."[4]

Bearing that in mind, we identified four types of locations that occur regularly throughout both Teusaquillo and Bogotá at large, but are not of

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[4] Saskia de Wit 'Green Galaxies;An Interstitial Strategy for Restorative Spaces'

particular symbolic significance – the intersection, the park, the empty lot and the plaza. We identified locations of each of these types of spaces, with the additional criteria being that these should be spaces where informal activity is already present, or occurring nearby. In other words, we looked at places which were already occupied by the people we were interested in. We looked at intersections, parks, empty lots and plazas.

Having located all of these spaces, we have then settled on four sites, each of different type, spread across appropriate area and over appropriate distances.

The planned interventions – a network of four, each occupying one of the different sites identified earlier and each serving a different purpose. Some of these interventions are connected on a more tangible level, some are connected symbolically, together, however, they should form a loose network of gathering spaces in the city, which provide opportunities for informal actors, and as such enable the exchange of experiences and knowledges between the people who use it. 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, Robby 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.

Located on the axis of Calle 45, the two interventions are comprised three main elements each, which serve as the focus of the interventions.

03 – NARRATIVE THREE – A PLACE

Plaza

Before

In the beginning, there was nothing.

Well, okay, that's not entirely true. Maybe in the grand scheme of things, cosmos, the big bang, stuff like that – but we're talking about a little space in Teuasquillo, Bogotá – not exactly the center of the universe.

So the nothingness was of a different kind – a littler one, man-made and premeditated. Grey concrete blocks laid down over the soil, not allowing it to breathe. Trees caged in, growing in little patches of dirt amidst the stone, their roots invisible. Two old buildings flanking the space, guarding its doors – guarding from what, it's hard to say. But that was all, the sorry state of it, the grand entrance to the biggest campus in the country.

People made do, of course. There was nowhere to sit, so they brought their own chairs. Scuffed things, metal or plastic, four-legged stools. Always just a little too low - once you sat down, it brought your knees up awkwardly, angled towards your ears. Most of these were always around those selling food, arranged in the indiscernible geometric patterns dictated by the length of time spent eating, the type of food being eaten, and the size of asses being sat.

The rush of people heading towards the campus parted around them like water.

During

The renovation of the plaza presented several logistic issues. The routing could, of course, be diverted to the other entrance into the campus, however the confusion and frustration involved in switching habits long ingrained would simply be too great.

So then – first the right side, with the concrete blocks up and gone overnight, at last. Almost like terraforming a new planet, the machinery came in and dug, dug, dug, producing the amounts of noise which were, frankly, incomprehensible. The landscape looked strange and foreign, dips and hills where before there was just flatness, bricks where there used to be concrete, trees reshuffled and scattered.

A period of transition – everyone passed through as quickly as possible.

After

It took some time for everyone to find their space. Initially the vendors scattered like birds, but eventually flocked back, settling down on steps, benches, ridges and curbs, looking as if they have always been here.

The first person to take the stage after the dust had settled down was a juggler. Balancing on a football, he threw his batons way up high, then caught them without breaking a sweat. He positioned himself in the pit stage, which just about brought his twitching hands down to the eye level

of the people passing by. Most of them stopped and stared. Unless you have the strongest of wills or a single-minded focus, it is now impossible to cross the university plaza in less than ten minutes.

Sometimes the patch of grass looks particularly soft and inviting. Other times, the smell of food frying wafting in from the strategically positioned carts proves too mouth-watering to resist. Some days, a friend calls you over from where they are perched on a bench, cloud of smoke around them; they grin and ask, hey, how it's going?

You have no choice but to sit down.

Years Down the Line

The scent of the herb garden fights for prominence with the fumes of Avenida NQS. No one is entirely sure who was the initiator, but some years back the middle patch of grass was converted from a leisure spot and into planting soil. There are now entire generations of students who do not know it as anything else. On performance nights, with the stage lit low, the spectators are immersed in not only the sound and vision, but also the smell, carrying across the plaza, the scent of mint and sage hanging heavy, almost mystical, in the air.

The two bamboo structures are now on their last legs, scraped and cracked, and will need to be replaced soon. There is a fundraising campaign and an ongoing debate between the students and the administration as to whether the structures should be replaced by new bamboo or steel. The winner remains unclear.

Several vendors have claimed particular spots as their own. They settle in with a racket every morning, just before the first classes are about to start, and leave long after they are done.

Tower

Before

In a soft slash of verdant green and old dog shit, Parkway snakes its way through Teusaquillo. Among the rigid facades of the city, it bends and yields, defiant in its gentleness, the messy, informal nature within its borders. Even a little old and a little unkempt, the quiet sway of its trees sings a welcoming song.

The park starts slow and silent, a thin patch of grass, a rock to mark its origin. Then it grows and builds, tumbles forward gaining speed, the grass gets greener and the trees grow higher, the traffic is now inaudible, the leaves in the wind are an orchestra, a whispering crescendo, what joy, onwards and upwards…!

Until it stops.

Cut off by the honk-hiss-screech of metal in motion, it cannot go any further, the ending so abrupt the orchestra falls silent, overpowered. The intersection at the end of Parkway is a starburst of fumes and asphalt – six roads branching off into different directions and all of them equally busy. There is an inherent violence to the way it cuts off the park, splits the river in two, leaves people feeling disoriented and small. To get through from one end to another feels less like crossing a street and more like crossing an ocean.

During I

The bamboo is the fastest growing plant on Earth. It is also, coincidentally, a grass – which means that once it is cut down, it will grow back up again. For a mere plant, it displays a remarkable level of resilience. Contradictory in its nature, it's strong and flexible, yet finicky, prone to splintering and cracking if handled incorrectly. Should we give up on something just because it's difficult to deal with? Just because it requires gentleness and care?

To see bamboo among the buildings of the city is to feel the echo of villages past; miles away, out of place but familiar. Other, but tangible. Parkway held it's breath.

During II

It was almost like a dance, with its own precise steps and rhythm, always in a group. Count of eight: on one, a single bamboo was lifted from the stack. On two, a complex move, it was rotated, swung upwards and sunk into the steel and concrete foundation. On three, the horizontal pieces were lifted and bolted through in place – this required supporting scaffoldings to rise. Four and five: secondary beams were affixed, the diagonals slotted in. The tower was rising. On six, the stairs, with their own choreography – a dance within a dance. Seven – the floors. On eight, the railing was woven through and with that the first movement was complete. A brief rest, and then it began all over again.

After

In the city the noise never really goes away. There are too many people and too many cars, the sound echoes along the streets, loud and abrasive. The only escape is to either leave the city entirely if you have the means to do so, or go higher – up a hill, up a mountain, up a tower. The sound then grows distant and muted, at last.

The tower in Teusaquillo doesn't have a name. No surname of a man long dead was bestowed upon it, it carries no titles and claims only the ground it sits upon. It's just – 'the tower' – and everyone knows. If you don't know, or if you forget about it after it's been shown to you, then it is not meant to be your space. That's alright. To each their own.

For those who do know, and do remember, the tower serves as a meeting point, a shelter, a point of reference, a service, a place of business and a place of rest. A new melody has started up, resonating with the park across.

It is the creak of the stairs and joints, the hiss of food frying, the splash of water hitting stone. The flap of a canopy overhead and the screech of a bird who sat down on the very top of the railing, the click of a camera shutter. A low chatter, the thumping of a child running across the first-floor terrace, a hackling cough of an old man who sat down in the shade for just five minutes, please, then we can continue.

A forest of bamboo sways in the wind, the orchestra picks up where it left off.

Years Down the Line

When you walk through a city, you leave your imprint on its streets, and they leave their mark on you. Pounding rhythm of a million footsteps, stone worn smooth, a bronze statue polished golden from all the hands that touched it.

The tower, too, bears marks of time. Some of its poles and beams shine lighter and brighter – they replaced ones that cracked or fell prey to insects. The bamboo now is in a range of shades, from smoked deep brown to light yellow, it makes no difference. More colors abound everywhere – the canopies replaced as needed, plain, striped or patterned; lights and bunting – for festivities and events. Posters and banners affixed and removed, affixed and removed, always leaving a little something behind. On the ground, the feet of the structure are scuffed but stand steady. On the top, the railing is worn smooth but remains secure.

The tower is easy to find.