PROJECT REFLECTION

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LOCAL POTENTIAL: Intensified operation of urban environment renewal by enhanced management and communication

WHY
The project started purely from my personal interest in the huge numbers of empty properties which I saw in London while living there few years ago. Friends of mine illegally lived in squats as they have been left empty for years while other locals organized illegal events in warehouses. Properties and land stand empty and yet somehow it continues to be illegal to do something about it even when one really wants to. Meanwhile, new developments keep popping up in the urban environment, though not always required. It was obvious this was a money related issue and a solid flaw in planning and political processes. When I saw the DesignAsPolitics graduation studio theme, I knew this would be a perfect time to investigate the process a bit further.

Even though it all started from interest in empty structures in a residential area in London, during the research process I realized it was a much larger issue common worldwide. The whole urban development process is being driven by the external developers who in fact have nothing to do with the area but the need to exploit it for development profit. Meanwhile locals who actually live in the area have less and less say in the process. It’s getting harder and harder for them to actually do any interventions within their living environment. While external project permissions area being signed by the local government without consulting the inhabitants and without integrating the developments into clear long-term urban design strategy for the area. Given the future predictions of London and its residential areas like Hackney becoming substantially denser in the future, one can imagine the poor state of urban environment quality if no solid changes are implemented in the planning process.

RESEARCH
I knew that in order to understand the problem specifics in more depth I had to zoom into a smaller area. Due to more intense economic activity and high numbers of vacant property a commercial center called Dalston Central was chosen for a case study. I started mapping the vacant properties and underused elements in the urban environment; looking for reasons they became empty in the first place. Accordingly I looked into current planning applications for new developments, submitted by external investors. I noticed quite soon that there is a big gap between interventions of different scale and function. Generally, projects are being implemented in a very isolated manner, when nothing outside the site boundary is taken into account. That becomes especially visible when looking into residential developments. After a chat with employees of the Hackney council on a site visit, I realized that even though there is an official development strategy for the Dalston area, it is being constantly “overlooked” when approving an external investment. Well established free-market trends and rules brought the urban development to a state where local officials are forced to agree with aspirations of the investors because that seems to be the only way to get any solid development happening at all. Additionally it seems like the only rapid solution to dealing with national problems like lack of housing and others.

Meanwhile, all the smaller interventions that are actually related to sustaining local identity and community seem to be left in the background. Most importantly they are treated like interventions which are completely unrelated to large housing developments right next to them. In the case of Dalston Central the local community market is treated separately from the newly designed commercial/retail centre while a community garden/park seems to be unrelated to the new housing block just on the other side of the road. Judging even from the writings on the local urban development blog (curated by the residents) It seems obvious that that “two sides” could easily benefit from each other and make their interventions work more efficiently if just there was a more decent physical/political
connection between them. Current division of the people involved in the process is what prevents the sustainable urban development from happening. Right now all the projects just try to bypass the problems and disagreements rather than look for shared interests between the parties. Of course we could just blame the greedy developers, ignorant designers and corrupt council officials, but the core problem is not them on their own, it is lack of communication between all of the groups involved at the same time.

I started analyzing the actual system itself. What are the steps that one needs to take to initiate any intervention? I noticed instantly the actual outdated system in operation of urban environment within Hackney. It is simply drowning in various levels of bureaucracy. Basically it seemed that the system is only for the people that actually work in the same system. Meanwhile other people have an image of it being complicated and do not even look for alternative approaches to using their urban environment. I started asking myself if this was really the only way? Seeing other industries flourishing with IT innovations making complicated processes more and more easy to operate, it was hard to understand how the industry that literally shapes our lives is so out-of-date. The idea for a new system started taking shape in my head. System which would merge different layers of urban environment and allow simple interactions between different parties involved.

APPROACH: to develop an altered planning system and apply it in a specific site (as a design task)

STRATEGIC DESIGN TASK: Under what conditions the development of the same area of Dalston could become a more democratic process, including more parties and ensuring efficient use of existing urban elements?

SPACEBANK

Performed research made it clear to me that the solution does not just lie in better urban design proposals. There have to be changes made in the institutional and organizational level of planning processes. Therefore a decision has been made in the thesis process to introduce a new institution called SPACE BANK. It works in parallel to Hackney Council and takes over all land/property use and development related matters. The core concept is that all the potential parties have to use the same online system in order to proceed with any possible changes in the urban environment and the alterations made/propose are visible also to all the parties – making the system more transparent. System ensures a more democratic planning process which includes residents as well as external investors when making decisions about local environment. The main task for the employees of the SpaceBank is to find the potential mutual benefits in projects and ensure: level of freedom for investors, efficient use of existing local assets (enhancing) and that only sustainable and sensible interventions happen within Hackney.

In parallel to the political and economic aspects of the new system I was also developing urban design/planning methodology under which SpaceBank would guide the system users that are engaging an intervention. As a long term vision on Urban Scale (Borough of Hackney) SpaceBank engages a Transit-Oriented development. First, the system approaches and tries to enhance the commercial-cores/town-centres. By improving their role as transit nodes for commuting and increasing the pedestrian/cyclist traffic inside the cores the system increases general activity within them. Hence, more commercial, leisure and other opportunities for residents and people visiting. The funds generated from the projects in the cores are then used to enhance the elements in the residential areas between the cores (parks, vacant structures, etc.). Finally routes that connect the cores and the elements are identified and enhanced; routes that are alternative to main car-roads and would be used for pedestrian/cyclist traffic.

DALSTON CENTRAL DESIGN

As a design task on the local level I have decided to test the new system and alter current development proposals in one of the cores – DalstonCentral, simulating the co-operative processes necessary between different parties to produce an alternative design for the area. I have concentrated on one urban core block of the area, trying to find
specific problems in the built environment as well as potential connections between the existing developers and other users/residents.

**SYSTEM METHODOLOGY**

In the design process I have identified various generic design methods/tools that enhance local environment in Dalston. I realised that they could in fact also be used in other commercial cores of Hackney to enhance those areas in a similar manner. (e.g. enhancing the frontages of the historic commercial streets inside the block). Therefore within the new system I have additionally developed a systematic toolset which allows an easier operation of urban assets with the reach of the system. They would be used for initial guidance of the potential users and regulation of their aspirations. In order to submit a planning application, the developer would have to meet certain regulations(of that specific site) produced after analyzing existing environment and consulting the local knowledge (e.g. ratio of greenery to built mass on site). This way the investor is given freedom to pursue his aspirations, meantime ensuring that his interventions do not have undesirable effects to the environment. After the submission the co-operation would start between other parties and the developer to make the most of his investment as well as enhance the surroundings of the local people.

**CONCLUSION**

The method allowed me to develop a design strategy that successfully deals with the initially stated problems and shows a working systematic approach on urban scale as well as a specific example on a local site. In the process I have developed better knowledge of the political processes related to the issues as well as familiarity with related systems, software and approaches able to enhance the urban environment process. Even though I have only created a scenario for one specific site, I am quite confident that the system could be enhanced and applied on a much larger scale; enhancing the life of a city and not just an urban block. In fact during the past year, I was inspired by these issues and have developed a particular interest in the influence of IT systems on urban environment development. I am quite confident the whole process is inevitably heading towards a completely computer/online based methods. The question is how quickly and to what extent can we implement them and allow people to finally become active participants in the development of their own places?