



Undigested Morsels

Interview with

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Urbanism is a very broad discipline. Can you describe the particularities of your research and interests?

My own work these days has to do with how we relate to the architecture and urbanism around us, less so the spectacular edifices than the nondescript precincts of our cities. You could say that I am mesmerized by the ordinary, by the stupefying rhythms of serial spaces. I pursue this work in several registers, including traditional scholarship, curatorial projects, and visual practices such as photography, mapping, and agitprop. I make images not simply for illustration, but as a method for producing knowledge.

So, like most people, I live in architecture, which hopefully qualifies me to say a little something about it. And though I am an urbanist first and foremost, my way into studying cities came through architectural history, or rather I should say a particular kind of architectural history, which I studied with Casey Blake and Henry Glassie. I've also written extensively about the construction of planning and design knowledge, and how such knowledge is entwined with race, class, and the projection of urban imaginaries. To be an urbanist is to ply a curious trade: we study the very thing that surrounds us from day to day. As an urbanist, I am not just proximate to my 'object' of study, I am constituted by it.

A lot of your research documents areas of cities that are 'damaged' in some way – the rough edges of urbanity. You also have tackled issues of race and gender in relation to urban development. To what extent do you feel the 'fear' of exploring taboo subjects restricts progress in our urban environments?

By taboo I will assume we mean more than simply forbidden, because whatever is forbidden tends to be foremost on our minds. Rather, we are probably talking about things repressed, forgotten, fugitive, disimminent. Of course, we ignore these subjects at our peril, because what we ignore comes back to haunt us, like undigested morsels sending signals up through our guts.

Here I would point to three lacunae in the bestiary of underexplored architecture and urbanism: one categorical, one typological, and one ontological. The first is what I will call the lacunae of the vernacular. Architects design very few of the world's buildings; most emerge out of manifold small-scale, self-organizing endeavors—what we call “the vernacular.” Architectural education, however, focuses primarily on the tiny sliver of singular, expert-designed buildings. Very few studios devote effort to the serial and the mundane where most of us dwell.

The second lacunae is that of the mundane program. We seldom challenge architecture students to confront the ordinary typologies that comprise the bulk of the urban landscape—the equipment sheds and storage facilities, warehouses and light industrial plant, trucking depots and call centers, gas stations and fast food joints. And we

don't invite students to bury themselves within and to wind through extant architecture, to make it recombinant, absurd, ugly, or routine. Nor do we ask them to grapple with property systems, land use policies, real estate laws, and the political economy of materials. We tend to reduce these to "context," but they are more: they are constituents of design—they are design.

And the third?

The third lacunae is what I will call the problem of the forlorn subject.

Who uses our architecture? Who adapts it to new uses, when, and why? Who dwells there, loves there, eats, sleeps, and dies there? Are our designs neutral fields on which actors flow smoothly, or do we project and conjure those actors—indeed their very subjectivities—through our architecture? We seldom design for the day laborer, the waste collector, the magician, the sex industry worker, the circus performer, the custodian, the house cleaner, the chanteuse or the charlatan.

Much of your work explores themes that counter pristine images of urban development – subjects that are undesirable to many or overlooked and frequently ignored. What is it that you find in these themes that unlocks something about the city which you feel is vital?

Well, I think a lot of it has to do with growing up in the deindustrializing Midwest. I think that more than anything has bent me toward the banal. So when I use techniques of architectural photography, for example, it's not to celebrate iconic buildings, but to explore the bland landscapes that surround us day after day after day. When I spent five weeks in Mexico City recently, my main goal wasn't to ogle the Centro Historico, but to see the Abasto—the city's great wholesale food market.

So why is the mundane so important?

If you begin with the premise that the city is greater than the sum of its parts, but that the whole is ultimately unattainable, this raises the stakes for exploring the margins and interstices. If the city is an uncanny cipher, you have to look for it through its trace—through its signals and noise, layers and edges, ghosts and hoaxes, fetishes and dreams. These collude and unravel at the margins, and it is there that we see the city's backstage take shape as a weird scene of hasty utility, of make-do'ness, unencumbered by aesthetic pretense or pomposity. So there I am, searching those interstitial spaces and recombinant environs that best reveal something of the urban.

Your urban research looks not at the urban traditions (rule book) but mainly presents sometimes uncomfortable realities of our cities. Do you feel that much of urban planning's tendency to use historical precedent (i.e. avenues) has created a framework which ignores the exploration of urban failure?

Absolutely, though I would go a step further and say that we don't even have proper language to describe success and failure. We are bamboozled by our own categories, flummoxed by our lack of imagination. We explored this in the film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*, but I don't think we went far enough. The problem isn't that we ignore failure, it's that our very notions of "success" and "failure" are overdetermined by the epistemological frameworks of planning and design. That said, I am indeed interested in the "rule book," as you put it, but more so in how it was constructed over time. That is, I am not so interested in describing how planners engage the world, but rather uncovering the knowledge they construct about the world in order to engage it.

Your work appears to be concerned with the forgotten audiences and constituents of architecture. At times, this complex, chaotic, and even messy entanglement of actors overwhelms the architect's vision of control, however artificial it may be. How do you manage this complexity and chaos in your own research and guiding students with their representations of the city?

What if exploring this complexity and entanglement WAS the purpose of architecture? We have received a vision of architecture as a clarification of the world, grand statements in stone or steel. But architecture can be so much more, and perhaps so much less too. Invisible global threads, and small things forgotten.

For my part, I wouldn't say I have a handle on how to manage complexity, but I do find it essential to be immersed in it. This involves several interlocking processes, and students who work with me learn this from the get-go. First, we have to account for all of the actors, interests, and networks that converge in the sites or processes we study. We map these actors and networks in detail, along with the laws, policies, and politics that organize the world. Then we complicate these on the ground through fieldwork and community engagement techniques. Only then do we make tentative proposals, which may or may not result in "architecture" in the standard sense, but could yield processes, flows, networks, routines, and other soft tissue.

Can you offer a few references of underrepresented urban projects that can serve as nuanced precedents?

I suppose that depends on what you mean by "urban projects." If you are talking about built form, there are certainly examples that I consider qualified successes. The most interesting of these are spatially modular, temporally incremental, and legally open-source, like Alejandro Aravena's Quinta Monroy houses in Chile, or Jo Noero's community-driven design and construction protocols for township houses in South Africa. In Aguascalientes, Mexico, a new linear park is taking shape on a right-of-way for a Pemex pipeline. The municipal government is investing funds, but a lot of the work is being done by people in the surrounding barrios. Creating superb cycling infrastructure in Bogotá didn't involve massive infrastructure construction, it was simply a matter of code-switching the existing networks by closing a set of streets to traffic.

All that said, I tend to be much more excited by projects that call attention to architecture, planning, and design by crafting experiences that are decidedly not these things, but something else. Parking Day is a good example, where people feed the meter to rent a space designed for an automobile for use as a public space. I look to artists a lot for these things, like Juliana Herera's project of filling potholes and sidewalk cracks with gorgeous colored yarn. Or Eve Mosher's effort to trace the high water mark in coastal cities using a lime-depositor; she trains people in coastal cities around the world to do this, as a way to bring attention to climate change. And we need more things like "Upendu Hero," a masked superhero who is a "sworn defender" of Kibera, the massive informal settlement in Nairobi.

More than anything, I feel that architects and planners have much to learn from the so-called "vernacular" world, the ways and means by which ordinary people shape and inhabit space. This includes practices like the weekly gathering of Filipina domestic workers at the HSBC headquarters in Hong Kong—the best use I can think of for that building, designed by Norman Foster for a transnational corporation deeply involved in crashing the global economy. Or what about desire paths? I am obsessed with those little dirt tracks worn into grass by repeated use. These lovely filaments provide direct critiques of planned landscapes. I also love adaptation, that is, how people take architecture they didn't create and refine it for their purposes. If you go to Levittown on Long Island today, you can see this in astonishing detail. Or in Amsterdam, every architect should visit the hidden Catholic church carved out of the interior of several merchant houses—a fugitive faith literally driving a worship community to worm their way through architecture.