

CAN WE DESIGN THE FUTURE FOR BETTER SOCIAL EQUITY?



All images are stills taken from the workshop video provided by Alexandra Staub, 2024.

ORGANISED BY:

Architecture Research Centers Consortium ARCC

WORKSHOP CONCEPTION:

Clare Robinson and Alexandra Staub

WORKSHOP FACILITATION:

Alexandra Staub

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS:

Maris Bardins
Pravin Bhiwapurkar
Roberto Cavallo
Eva Gjessing
Lisa lulo
Björn Lundell
Camilla H. Møller
Donghwan Moon
Isabel Potworowski
Traci Rider
Franca Trubiano
Beth Weinstein
Sean Yuxiang Li

“SO YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD? START BY CHANGING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT.” (MASSEY 2012)

Our built environment exists at several interlocked scales: individual buildings shelter us, represent our aspirations, and mark our perceived place in the world; neighborhood systems offer identity and a sense of community, and cities connect us to larger needs such as economic opportunities, education, and health and recreation.

Planning the physical environment is left largely to professionals whose background and training are often technical rather than rooted in epistemic standards derived from conditions of humanity. Put another way, the professionalization of how we shape our built environment has gone hand in hand with a critical loss of regard based on an understanding of history and acknowledgement of social patterns and needs that determine our place in the world.

This workshop examined the role that stakeholders might play in physically shaping our environment, and with it the framework for cultural expression and social equity.

Participants were given a prompt from the essay “Five Ways to Change the World” by Jonathan

Massey, taken from the volume *Where are the Utopian Visionaries: Architecture of Social Exchange*. The three prompts selected were “Build a House”, “Shop”, and “Throw a Party”. The reading focused on how everyday decisions can impact our built environment and how we live.

In a first example, Massey explored how, “houses [...] provide the context for many consumption decisions and shape the patterns of daily life and intimate relationships.” Massey then presented examples that promised liberation from convention. Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion house, for example, provided resource efficiency but also promised social transformation through liberating users from, “the social and financial systems – above all mortgages – that bonded individuals in [...] a form of serfdom.” The Schröder House, commissioned by Truus Schröder for herself and her children in Utrecht in 1924¹ permitted its residents to, “define the degrees of intimacy or withdrawal they wanted [...] through moment-by-moment choices about how to live separately and together.” Finally, a house designed by Rudolf Schindler in California in 1921 provided communal living spaces for two families (his own and another).

In a section that examined (primarily U.S.) shopping patterns, Massey showed that, “consumption offers a constant, vast, and extraordinarily nuanced vehicle of expression.” Massey pointed to “Automats”, self-service, vending-machine restaurants that flourished in many European and North American cities in the first half of the twentieth century and unexpectedly became accessible public venues that allowed marginalized populations spaces of refuge and even activism.” Massey used “queer culture” as an example during a time when homosexuality was stigmatized or illegal. Today, our commercial transactions continue to impact the world: “The ways we produce and consume energy, food, goods, and the built environment have broad consequences for the future of the planet and society,” while “individual expenditures aggregate to produce large outcomes.”

In a section titled “Throw a Party”, Massey examines a low stakes way to create social change. Pointing to the pageants, processions, and festivals of yesterday that, “helped disparate social groups [...] work together to govern the city and plan its future,” Massey points to today’s events that might be, “throbbing dance parties [that] create immersive, affective environments,” as well as festive art parties, film festivals, and other examples of communal ritual.

After reading the text, workshop participants discussed ways in which housing, shopping, and public events could be used by architects and other stakeholders to improve social equity and inclusion. Participants were asked to brainstorm models for better social equity and determine what new opportunities for both design and research might look like. The following sections present reflections made in the three workshop groups.

HOUSING GROUP:

Our group noted that the reading is over a decade old and reflects situations prevalent in the United States, with its emphasis on the single family house – a housing form that will not remain sustainable for the twenty-first century. The examples in the reading – Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion House, Gerrit Rietveld’s Schröder House, and Rudolf Schindler’s own house in California – were presented as iconic architecture that offered social opportunities. Our architectural education, however, tends to focus on the “iconic” nature of the buildings rather than the social opportunities they present.

We discussed how a key social issue continues to be the right to housing, a question that we need to address through policy and legislation. Even in countries where such policies are fairly well developed, for example through northern Europe’s state subsidized housing programs, more can be done. In some countries (for example the United States), housing is seen as a commodity. We asked ourselves: who has access to housing and how can we make it more accessible for all people? What should the future of housing look like? How can architects work towards substantial social equity changes to the built environment?

In many contexts, existing housing is too large for our needs, and in some cases, older housing no longer fulfills our needs. To better use urban space, we must think of ways to refurbish urban housing to meet today’s standards. For example, we could make housing subdividable, we could swap housing if our needs change, or include shared amenities for children.

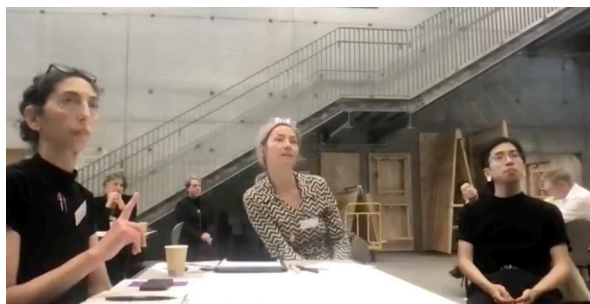
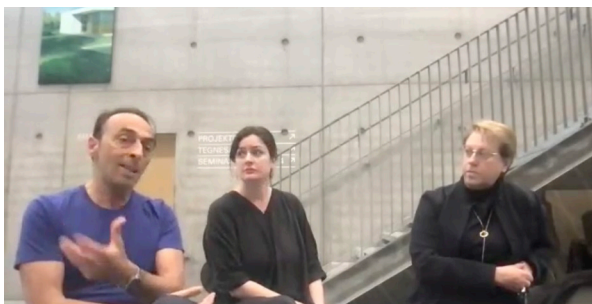
What should housing research questions be? Some that we identified: What is the role of legislation and policy in housing equity, what is the role of design, who is designing for whom? These questions led us to thinking about co-creation of both research questions and results. The community needs to be part of any housing discussion and that will require new organizational models.

We discussed organizational models for owning a house together, and building and transforming it together. In Denmark there is a program for non-profit affordable housing, which now makes up 20% of Denmark's housing market. The financing model is quite complex, and is based on the idea is that everyone is able to live in the housing, and no one makes a profit from it. The model is based on housing organizations that are governed by tenant democracy. Under this model, housing is not considered a capital investment, it's considered a home. We discussed the need for research on new organizational models for providing housing. We design housing, we design communities, and we can also design organizational models to better provide for and accommodate both.



as bartering for goods or allowing surplus food or objects to be shared or given away. We discussed how it's important to keep these "markets" open and transparent. A solution might be to keep things local. This would allow people to get to know each other, too.

The reading discussed how certain types of sharing, such as the "Automat" restaurants, supported alternative cultures, such as the "queer culture" described in the Automat example. There's a feedback loop here, where a culture fosters a practice that then leads to a space that allows that culture to emerge and express itself. We discussed this phenomenon in terms of trust. When there is ethnic or racial bias, for example, trust needs to be built up, otherwise we



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SHOPPING GROUP:

Our group started with ideas of sharing. One way to support social causes is to make purchases with an eye towards shareability. We discussed sharing short-term housing (through online platforms) and vehicles (through car or bike sharing programs). We discussed the policies that are necessary to encourage sharing as well as bartering or swapping programs, where individuals don't purchase new items or services but trade them locally. Sometimes such programs increase social equity and sometimes they end up impoverishing the tax base and thus drain resources that can support social initiatives.

Many things happen "under the table" as part of a gig economy or on alternative platforms, and we discussed how policies can serve to educate, acculturate and legitimize alternative practices, such

run the risk of exclusion in certain spaces. Sharing is part of a system of trust-building.

Education is a key policy here as well – we must learn how to share, to build trust, and to avoid over-commercialization. Alternative spaces of consumption create alternative spaces of sociability. Shared kitchens, where a person cooks for a group, are one example of this phenomenon. Both social and material exchanges need to be rehearsed to allow for policy changes to happen. When we create spaces, they sometimes fill with life in ways that are unanticipated – we saw that in the Automat example presented in the reading.

Historical examples help us understand possible outcomes of spatial use, so one aspect of our research could be to better understand how spaces have been used socially in the past and why. There

are specific examples of communal thinking here: for example, in restaurants that provide free surplus food to the community. Another example is presented by the owner of the Flying Tiger stores in Denmark, who has bought several churches and opened them to provide free food to the community.

THROW A PARTY GROUP:

In our group, we talked about what defines celebrations and parties and quickly determined that different communities in different locations might have quite different views on what a celebration is. We defined “party” as a celebration of life with food, dance, music, etc. and thought about how we could make that accessible to all people. Based on the prompts given, we thought about how future generations might recreate, and what new opportunities for design, community offerings, and research might look like.

Recreation should be accessible to everyone. Recreation might involve going into the forest or countryside, but we also need recreational opportunities in urban neighborhoods. We discussed what recreational spaces in urban areas should be like and determined that such spaces should be flexible and adaptable and provide opportunities for people to meet. People must also identify with and feel “ownership” over the spaces they occupy in order to find relaxation there, so recreational spaces must provide a sense of identity. Public spaces can be commissioned. Part of a street, or parts of a square can be redefined and networked so that you can visit other recreational spaces but also have a recreational space in “your” neighborhood.

Aarhus is a good place to party. There are many beautiful urban spaces that invite people to socialize. To create recreational spaces, we can work with community organizations, local governments, or resident groups to redefine existing urban spaces or even seek out abandoned areas that might be reprogrammed. These kinds of projects create new opportunities for existing spaces.

In our group, we all focus on community-based research. We felt that whatever community you’re in has something to offer to people both inside and outside the community, for example, nationality celebrations, food culture, etc. So, if there were different hubs with different types of celebrations, then people could move between the hubs. This would create a network of celebrations at different scales. This could lead into things like intergenerational support as well as support across neighborhoods or ethnic communities.

Research opportunities are abundant. We’ve made many proposals here, but we don’t yet know how they will work. A community-based participatory-research model must include all members of a community. This type of research allows the community to weigh in on definitions. What is a party for the community? How do we better create social equity?

Those of us working in community research are very aware of the barriers that we sometimes create. We must work with the community to understand how to break down those barriers. This type of research could be done through narrative or graphic studies, or even quantitatively. It’s important to update the research frequently because habits and patterns change – for example kids nowadays are online much more than in previous generations. We have to factor this into our research.

Finally, it’s important to work with and not for the community. We have the technical knowledge, but community members have the social knowledge.

CONCLUSION:

A common thread in all three group discussions was the importance of involving stakeholders in any design process, be it housing design, community sharing platforms, or the design of recreational spaces. Workshop participants also stressed that research must engage the community in a participatory process and that representation must be carefully monitored to avoid research bias. The workshop groups presented an array of ideas for more equitable living, with flexible and shareable resources at their core. Finally, the groups emphasized that research, design, and policy decisions all factor into improving social equity – and that the built environment can work towards changing our world.

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Massey, Jonathan. 2012. “Five Ways to Change the World.” In *Where Are the Utopian Visionaries? Architecture of Social Exchange*, edited by Hansy Better Barraza. New York: Periscope Publishing.

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ENDNOTES:

¹Schröder commissioned architect Gerrit Rietveld to build the house; both client and architect worked on its design.