

# UNEVEN GROWTH

**Tactical Urbanisms  
for Expanding  
Megacities**

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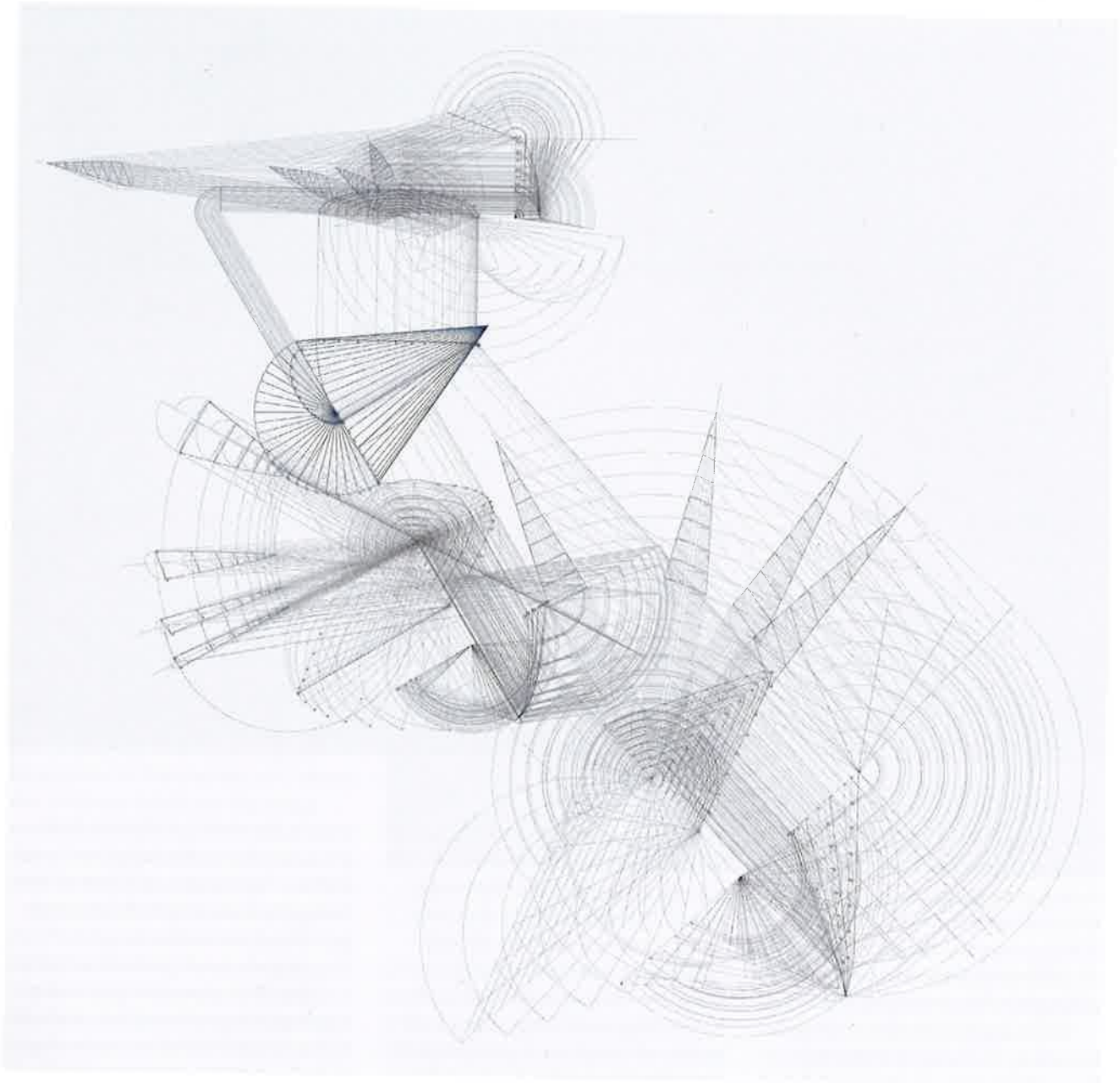
**The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York**

# **URBAN CHALLENGES**

**Specifications of Form  
and the Indeterminacy of  
Public Reception**

**Nader Tehrani**

**Architects are not just speaking to urbanistic issues in the traditional sense but to an urbanism of extraordinary dimensions and scope. Thus, the techniques and devices that form the foundations of this work cannot readily rely on received "urban design" conventions or toolboxes ...**



Mark Ericson, *Euclid's Wedge*, 2014. Digital print. Collection the artist

The theme of *Uneven Growth* is, no doubt, the result of certain urban and societal urgencies that are specific to our time—the radical speed of urbanization, the large imbalance between wealth and poverty, and an unprecedented scale of urbanization for which normative urban design techniques are less effective.

The theme should also be taken in a broader historical context to guide a new approach to the discipline of city making looking forward. First and foremost, we are faced with a situation where the traditional disciplinary boundaries between urbanism, planning, and geography may become a liability. The complexity of

the issues we now face requires the kind of analysis that is fundamentally interdisciplinary given the magnitude of data, knowledge, and emerging techniques that necessarily come into play when formulating a contemporary response. How the discipline of design factors into this process as a significant player is also in question.





Aerial view of São Paulo, 2007

The spatial, material, and formal aspects of planning cannot merely be indexed through the play of policy. Their instrumentality by means of design may be the precondition for rethinking urban and territorial strategies of the emerging city.

Central to the mission of *Uneven Growth* is, of course, the idea that the participants will offer not just analysis but also concrete proposals for various cities. This poses a twofold challenge: first, regarding the ideological nature and criteria of analysis as a launching point, and, second, the ability for design—through its instrumentality—to instigate change. Design agency is at the center of this question, as is how architects and artists bring to the table certain disciplinary traits and techniques

that are not merely reducible to ideas, but ideas in the form of materials, spaces, and form itself. Otherwise stated, the argument is that forms, spaces, and materials are already culturally encoded with certain embedded ideas, and with the capacity to instigate readings as much as rituals—although not in deterministic ways. For this reason, it is necessary to achieve a connection between the architectural discipline and the instruments of social change, with a focus on how the techniques of the former gain a dominant voice in the shaping the politics of the latter.

The challenge, of course, is how to bridge the gap between larger societal questions, on the one hand, and the specifications of architecture and design that are often seen as

arcane, hermetic, or elitist in their preoccupation with disciplinary peculiarities. Techniques and devices that define the instrumentality of design practices have quite a range, but they include practices such as formal composition, geometric patterning, typological transformations, material behavior and innovation, technological integration—or, more currently, parametric variations, environmental simulation—to name just a few. These tools are the prerequisite for architectural action and yet do not necessarily guarantee effective performance, cultural appreciation, or common reception.

The reception of the architectural discipline among a wider audience, for instance, is often fraught with an indifference to the very nuances of



design practices, but nonetheless is central to its cultural relevance. The cultural warfare that is part of the reception by architects and urbanists does, in fact, require “the practice of everyday life” to gauge its performance, all of which happens in the context of broader economic, social, and political alignments. The theory of everyday life follows that none of the authors’ intentions can actually be brought into alignment with the practices that occur in spaces. That is, in part, precisely the point: that the practices of everyday life bring a healthy and critical challenge to the dominance of specification, determination, and dictation. Indeed, one of the great contradictions of this research is to pit designers—as agents of specification—against a theoretical argument that challenges the very premise of top-down dictation—or at least gives credence to the idea that all that is specified will provoke misuse, appropriation, and transformation. As such, the practice of everyday life can be seen as the completion of the creative act, where the audience takes over the stage and becomes part of the *mise-en-scène*—unscripted, but even more potent than the screenplay.

However it may seem, my argument centers around the idea that our power as designers is, in part, due to disciplinary expertise, and it is its techniques that gain tactical relevance in the battle to project ideas about the emerging city. This, of course, does not suggest that as designers we do not have other forms of agency, but simply underscores how the peculiar tools of our practice have an embedded political capital. We must be aware that design operates irreducibly from a top-down perspective in its acts of specification, while its reception serves as a bottom-up antidote. The tools of design demonstrate, they prove, they



Anticoli Corrado, in the Sabine Mountains near Rome. From Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), p. 36

construct alibis, and they qualify as much as quantify, but they do it through images, forms, and “constructs” that are not limited to words. It is these devices that help us to translate ideas to a broader audience.

In this context, it is also important to note that the convening architects are not just speaking to urbanistic issues in the traditional sense but to an urbanism of extraordinary

dimensions and scope. Thus, the techniques and devices that form the foundations of this work cannot readily rely on the received “urban design” conventions or toolboxes; one might need to develop an intellectual framework that is at once

much larger than the city, perhaps at the scale of geography.

Of key concern is the challenge that once economics is gauged on the



Norry. 2010. Improvised bamboo train in Cambodia

global scale and once pollution and ecological damage is measured across borders—at the scale of the geographic—then one's design instruments would necessarily need to accommodate an understanding of that phenomenon in commensurate terms so as not to trivialize the challenges of the megacity with the scale of tactical jewels. This is not so much a critique as a warning of the dangers of missing the larger picture or completely abandoning a vision of a larger order that may ensure the survival of scaled-down tactics.

It is, of course, alarming that with the rapid expansion of megacities there comes a deterioration of social conditions. The question is to what degree that is the result of design, urbanism, and the physical growth



Adrian Melis. *Vigilia/Night Watch*. 2005–06. Video: color, 5:30 minutes

among other basic expectations. Bad design can be overcome with tactical alterations, but bad policies form a labyrinth of preconditions that defy the mobilization of the very social conditions we aim to challenge. For these reasons, while attempting to address a theme on tactical urbanism, one cannot fully disengage from a constructive dialogue with the contingencies that form the base of urban formations as well as the very policies that create the order of the city—even if centralized. If anything, the critical agency of tactical urbanism emerges from the adjacency it has with top-down orders.

of the city, or alternatively to what degree it is caused by the lack of policies that are the preconditions for social welfare: access to education, health, and shelter,

If you like, the top-down serves as the host, and the bottom-up, its parasite. The danger of maintaining this opposition intact is, of course, to take for granted that there are no alternatives to the grand narrative that serves larger orders, on the one hand, and that the critique of power can only be done parasitically, and in some form of subservience.

In this sense, the very institutionalization of tactical urbanism at MoMA might mark the beginning of its domestication into a codified and ordered set of conventions, something the brief inadvertently or self-consciously professes—but it seems to do so also as something we can eventually transmit as a set of principles, with pedagogical ambitions and even a basis for policy someday, though it does not state this explicitly. Will the domestication of tactical thinking lessen its critical edge? Can it maintain its strategic position when it serves as a foundation for “best practice” in urban design?

Maybe so, but it suggests that we must examine what the status of “informality” is in this discussion. For instance, the informal tactics of urban mobilization, the result of Twitter and Facebook on the streets of Tehran in 2009, is one thing, and the aesthetic of informal decomposition as practiced by Sou Fujimoto is altogether another; I offer him as only one protagonist within this formal project. The former taps into the bottom-up guerrilla use of technologies of the day in the service of political action, which one can say in the process rediscovers the latent urbanism of Tehran. Tehran is revealed in the process but is not necessarily projected forward as having any formal ambitions; it does not enter the space of speculation but simply offers



High Line before reconstruction, New York. 2002





Sou Fujimoto Architects. Tokyo Apartment. 2009–10

a body on which social and political speculations find their imprint.

The work of Fujimoto, on the other hand, launches itself from the discipline of architecture, taking what Bernard Rudofsky called non-pedigreed architecture, an architecture without architects, to a state of self-consciousness, to the heights of artifice. Fujimoto takes what is historically developed as a consequence of organic urban growth as a starting point for a synchronic and artificial act: to compose informally, to develop new rules for informality, and to develop a syntax for that

which seems random. It is maybe poignant that Rudofsky's exhibition was hosted by MoMA in 1964.

Beyond the obvious and evident differences between informal process and informal product, as illustrated by the use of technology in Tehran and the use of composition by Fujimoto, what is remarkable today is the fact that the informal has already had a significant impact on our thinking, and has even driven

projects such as the High Line in New York, a project conceived as conceptual, with a series of parasitical towers attached to it by Steven Holl,

but then championed by a series of "friends," who in turn mobilized both bottom-up and top-down agencies to radically transform a near-obsolete piece of infrastructure into an active and critical piece of urban preservation, a testament to resilience. Here process and product come together in a more deliberate way, radicalizing the nature of both the artifact and the mechanisms that bring it to life.

The question of infrastructure should loom large in this discussion. Whether we are talking about the federal funds that are thrown at large infrastructural projects (top-down) or about the high-speed urbanizations already underway in China (again, centralized with a vengeance), both involve a level of growth, investment, and public impact that are



Department of Urban Betterment (John Locke). Book Share, New York. 2012





Tahrir Square in Cairo during Arab Spring, 2011

unprecedented in historical footprints. In both cases, the “public” is thrown under the bus, as it were—in the U.S. due to the the pattern of privatization that is the legacy of the last thirty years, and in China due to myopia, pragmatism, and ambitions for global prestige. Ironically, it is exactly in the area of infrastructure that tactical strategies become relevant for populations that do not receive plumbing, electricity, services, transportation, and for public space that is kept in the margins of architectural and urbanistic representation. Here representation is not merely symbolic but quite material, and a symptom of the very poverty that is the theme of this research. So, given the predicaments of this mission, what do architects, as agents of specification, design? Do they design solutions or reveal problems?

Do they tap into the realm of infrastructure, opening up the design artifact for appropriation and personalization?

The other tactical route is to examine the legal edifice that builds the city as a juridical idea and to expose its forms; to do so is also to reveal its loopholes, codes, zoning constraints, and of course its exceptions and latent potentials. As it turns out, the bias of the law serves as an ideological ground that taints most urban policy and all infrastructural projects, and certainly gives form to the very city we are seeking to challenge. It is the white elephant in the room. For this reason, if the strategic developers of today use this very mechanism to build the city of privatization, why couldn't the same tactical thinking provide countermechanisms to

offer alternatives to the megacity to come?

The urban case studies in *Uneven Growth* provide for a rich ground of geographic locations from which to speculate. From Lagos to Mumbai and from Hong Kong to New York, all would tend to interpret culture, space, and the law in different ways. Of these cities, some will grow tenfold with unprecedented speed, as we have seen in the past years. The challenges are how to mitigate this speed tactically, how to address the scale of the “mega” when one has no control of the centralized narrative, and how designers are to instigate change in the street without the strong arm of specification. If design's agency is precisely in its control of form, then how can one control its specifications while also developing protocols for its



appropriation? How does one work within the law of design when being asked to work from the outside? And how does one avoid trivializing with a diminutive scale when the development of the city is forging ahead at a speed so raging that it poses the danger of simply running you over?

Tactical urbanism may be the material of guerilla warfare—the spontaneous combustion of a neighborhood built on unsecured property, or the takeover of public space, as we have seen in the Arab Spring. But techniques of warfare do not always work once a ceasefire has been secured. Thus, I would submit that a different form of tactical confrontation is also necessary once peace has been achieved—when common laws are put back into practice once again.

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Mazzanti & Arquitectos. Bosque de la Esperanza (Forest of Hope), Bogotá. 2012