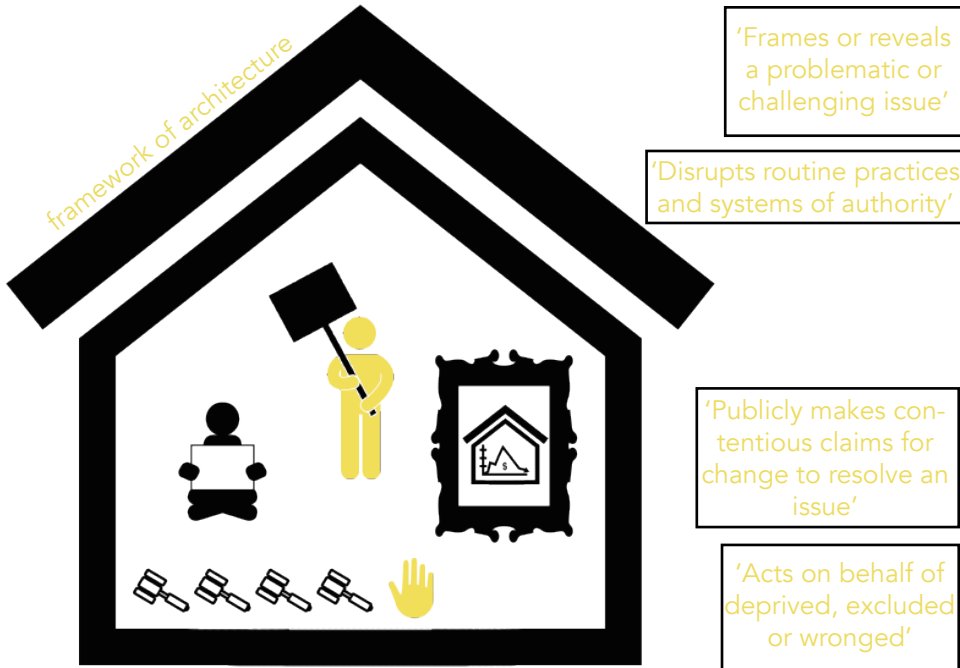# PREFIGURATIVE ARCHITECTURES

PREFIGURATIVE PRACTICES
ISOBEL ROBERTSON

*GRUPO TOMA*
*ARIF HASAN*
*SANTIAGO CIRUGEDA*
*INCREMENTAL HOUSING STRATEGY*
*UNSTUDIOS*

# INTRODUCTION TO PREFIGURATION



framework of architecture

'Frames or reveals a problematic or challenging issue'

'Disrupts routine practices and systems of authority'

'Publicly makes contentious claims for change to resolve an issue'

'Acts on behalf of deprived, excluded or wronged'

There has been a shift in recent years from the high tech, high profile 'starchitect' to that of a 'social architect'. This notion of the social architect isn't a new one but with heightening disparities between the rich and the poor, declining natural resources (Jowit, J. 2008) and people living in poverty increasing (Butler, P. 2015) the need for a morally sensitive architecture has increased. Prefigurative architecture is a form of social architecture that uses physical interventions, or installations as an illustration of a social or political discontent. As Boano and Kelling observe it's 'individuals contesting their subordinate position through an act of disrupting the division of sensible experience.' I will analyse the following five practices and establish whether they are forms of prefigurative architecture and if so, how successful they have been.

*'Behavior is the function of a person within their environment.'*
*(Garrett, H.E. 1939)*

# GRUPO TOMA

SANTIAGO, CHILE



Grupo Toma is a group of five architects working in Santiago, Chile. 'The standard definition of an architect is someone who designs buildings' (Till, J. and Schneider, T. 2002) but Grupo Toma see the 'architect as a mediator, as an entity capable of linking organisation, of connecting political and economic powers' (Klenner, M. 2015).
The group seek out industrial spaces mainly in Santiago and convert them into new industries that produce knowledge. These spaces usually engender a political discourse with respect to them and in reinterpreting them they aim to encourage community involvement in the issues.

*"How do you create possibilities?*
*How do you think about the future?*
*And how do you connect these different groups of people?"*
*(Grupo TOMA. 2014)*

DISRUPTING THE 'ARCHITECT'

*"So, the question is whether citizens individually or organised - aren't in need of other ways to be part of the changes that society and the cities need"*

By working on smaller scale projects it allows the architects to realise the 'intersection between architecture and art' (Ignacio Saavedra, 2015) and experiment in a way they might not with larger projects. 'Working without intermediaries has been a boon to the group's experimental attitude and productivity, which might otherwise be curtailed by bureaucratic setbacks.' (ArchDaily, 2015)



Image source:
Grupo TOMA. [Facebook]. 2014

DISRUPTING THE 'ARCHITECT'

community organisations     architect as a mediator     political and economic powers
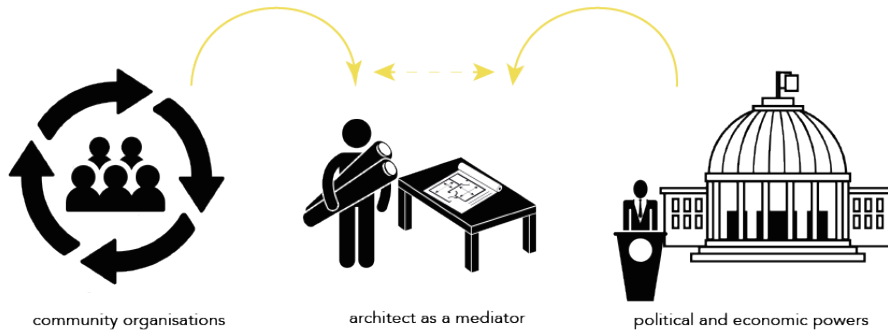
Prefiguration of the role of the architect

The provisions and materials available to the group are scarce but as Till and Schneider point out give an extended field for architectural intelligence and creativity to operate on and to engage in much wider discussions about behaviour and consumption (Till, J. and Schneider, T. 2012). By having a limited supply of materials not traditionally used for construction the group are able to come up with experimental ways of creating the spaces they envisage.

*"Scarcity thus conjoins the physical with the social, and the ecological with the political, which in turn implies that any operation within the context of scarcity has to negotiate these relationships" (Till, J. and Schneider, T. 2012)*



Image source:
Grupo TOMA. [Facebook], 2014

*"we believe these projects are more conductive for generating debate, reflection and dialogue that we believe is relevant"* (Saavedra, I. 2015)
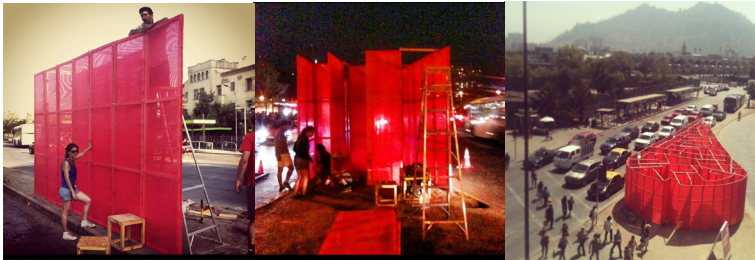


Ignacio Saavedra a member of Grupo Toma, believes that we should begin thinking in a utopian way (Saavedra, I. 2015). However, Grupo Toma's actions are more pre-figurative than utopian. Utopias are projections from the social fabrics, and imagine a future activity, where-as prefigurative actions happen in the now, attempting to disrupt the current order of things.



prefigurative idea          utopian idea
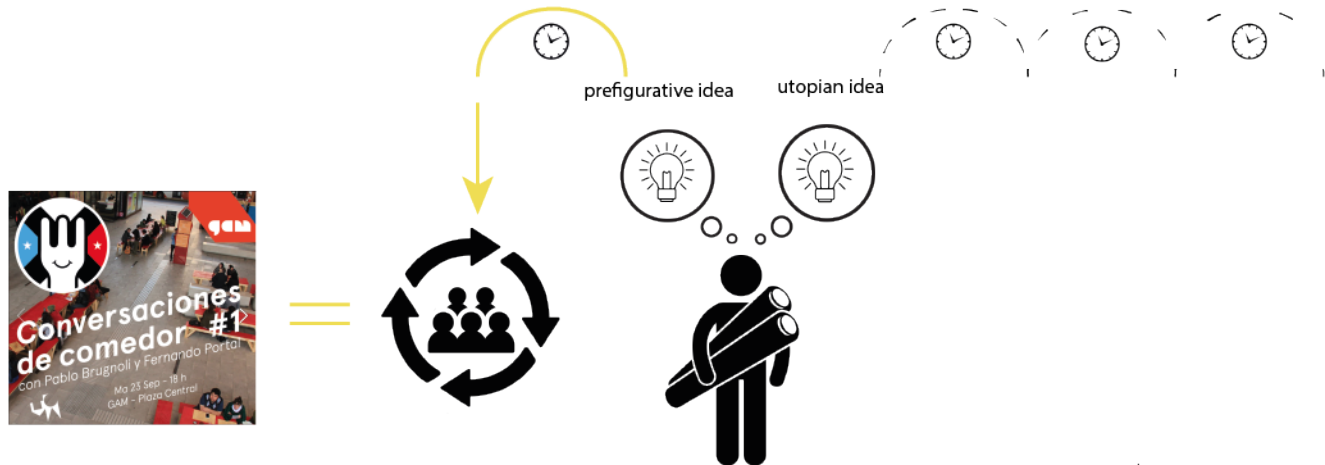
Utopian vs Prefigurative. Future Action vs Action Now

Image source:
Grupo TOMA. [Facebook]. 2014

# ARIF HASAN
## ORANGI PILOT PROJECT RESEARCH

Arif Hasan is a Karachi based architect who set up the Orangi Pilot Project Research Training Institute. By teaching people in poor communities the technical skills they need to construct their own properties, OPP-RTI gives these people the freedom to help themselves without the need to call upon (often ineffective or inappropriate) government intervention (Till, J. and Schneider, T.). By carrying out focussed research, Hasan aims to provide effective advice and training for the community.



*'participation can take a multiplicity of forms, from pacifying critique to politicising action.' (Boano, C.and Kelling, E. 2013)*
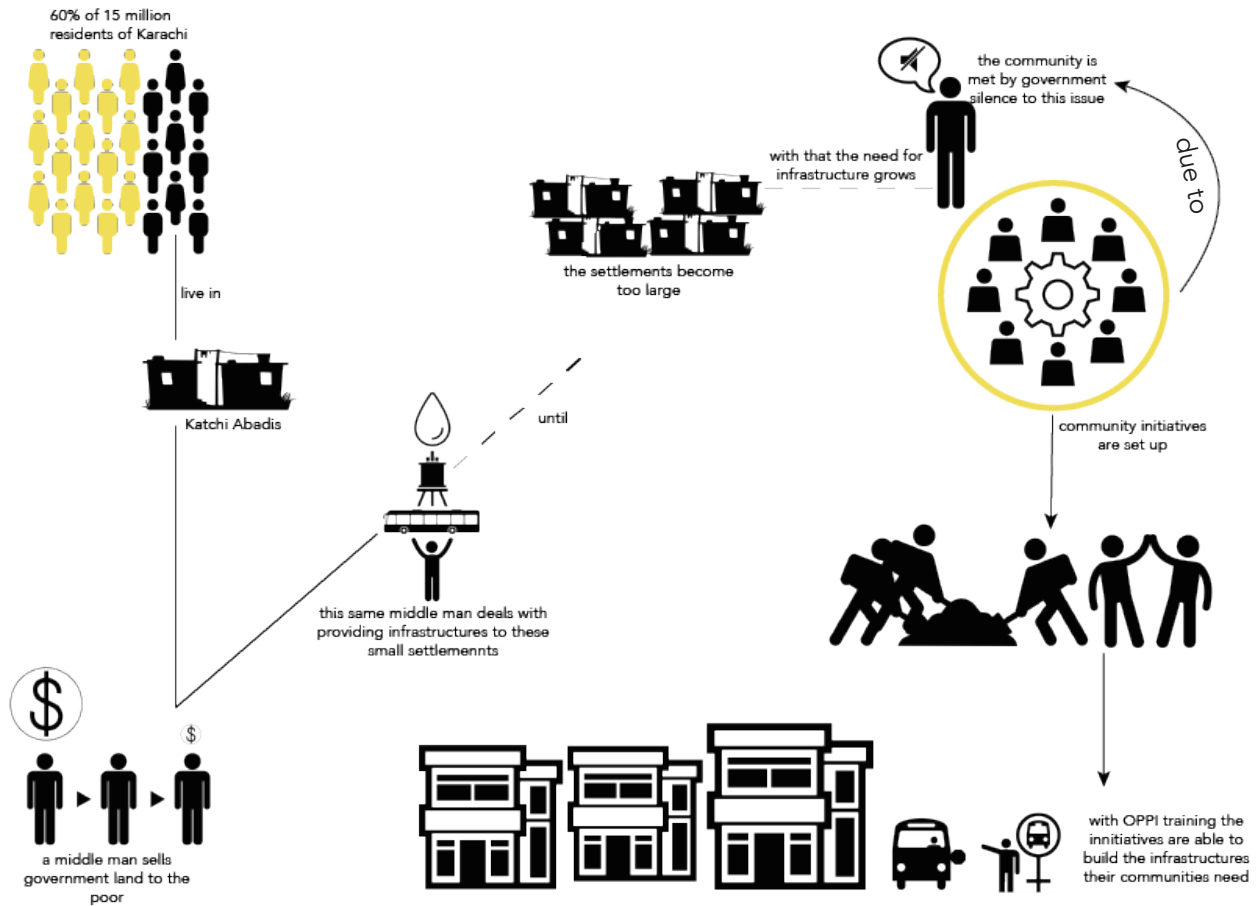
DISRUPTING PROCUREMENT

In Karachi 60% of the 15 million citiziens live in what is known as Katchi Abadis (housing for poor people). This land is purchased from a middle man who subdivides government land and sells it to the poor. Initially it is this middle man who provides water tankers, tranportation routes, etc. but as these settlements expand and the need for infrasture grows the inhabitants are left to organise this, in the absense of government assistance, loca initiatives are established. (Orangi Pilot Project Institution. 2012).

*'community-driven, ambient intelligences take when they are inscribed and wired bottom-up as urban prototypes.' (Jimenez, A. 2014)*



Image Source:
Orangi Pilot Project Institution. 2012.

DISRUPTING PROCUREMENT

60% of 15 million residents of Karachi

live in

Katchi Abadis

the settlements become too large

with that the need for infrastructure grows

the community is met by government silence to this issue

due to

community initiatives are set up

this same middle man deals with providing infrastructures to these small settlemennts

until

a middle man sells government land to the poor

with OPPI training the innitiatives are able to build the infrastructures their communities need

DISRUPTING PROCUREMENT

*'peer-to-peer decentralised networks are blurring traditional distinctions between production, distribution, and consumption of informational forms.'*
*(Jimenez, A. 2014)*

These inititatives and the intervention of the OPP-RTI allow communities to prefigure the procurement process and cut out the middle men and the need for the agencies they provide, such as government, political and private contacts.

By challenging the domination of governmental structures these poor communities are also 'calling capitalism itself into question' (Jones, P. and Card, K. 2011).

OPP-RTI teach skills and knowledge to these deprived communities which begins to break  the entanglement between politics and property/infrastructure because this lower socio-economic class can now employ the leverage of knowledge to decommodify the process of procurement.

Image Source:
Orangi Pilot Project Institution. 2012.

DISRUPTING PROCUREMENT

# SANTIGO CIRUGEDA

*"Contemporary architecture is all about 'what a beautiful building'…'what a pretty project' .... But architecture is more than that; it should be functional, cheap. It should be a reason to come together – and that's what we've done. (Cirugeda, S. 2014)"*
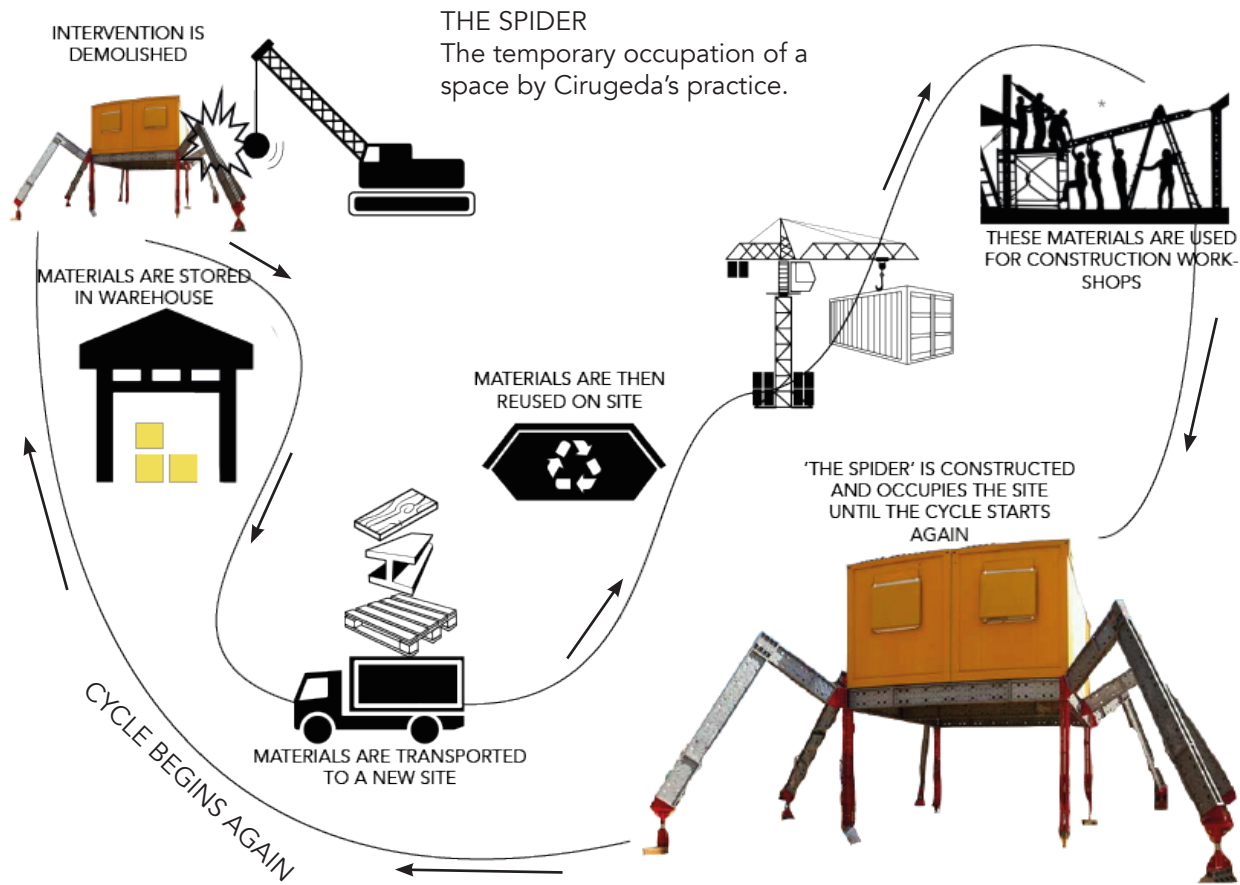
Santiago Cirugeda is a Spain based architect. He and his practice - Urban Recipes - work alongside collectives to participate in self-build projects that transform spaces - usually illegally. The current economic crisis in Spain means there are multiple collectives many of which use occupation as a way of protesting. Cirugeda offers these collectives a physical way to occupy space and 'take action' and inform authorities that they 'want to make things happen' (Cirugeda, S. 2014).



The Spider

DISRUPTING SPACE

INTERVENTION IS DEMOLISHED

THE SPIDER
The temporary occupation of a space by Cirugeda's practice.

THESE MATERIALS ARE USED FOR CONSTRUCTION WORK-SHOPS

MATERIALS ARE STORED IN WAREHOUSE

MATERIALS ARE THEN REUSED ON SITE

'THE SPIDER' IS CONSTRUCTED AND OCCUPIES THE SITE UNTIL THE CYCLE STARTS AGAIN

MATERIALS ARE TRANSPORTED TO A NEW SITE

CYCLE BEGINS AGAIN

DISRUPTING SPACE

TRAVELLING PLAYGROUND, 1979

In 1979 Cirugeda prefigured his local neighbourhood in Seville by creating an 'urban playground'. He applied for a standard skip license and because of a nearby construction site it was granted. Instead of using the skip for construction waste he instead created a seesaw that became popular with the local children.

However, local people complained and Cirugeda was quickly summoned to the police station. Because he had the appropriate license and the skip was clearly marked there was nothing the local authorities could do.
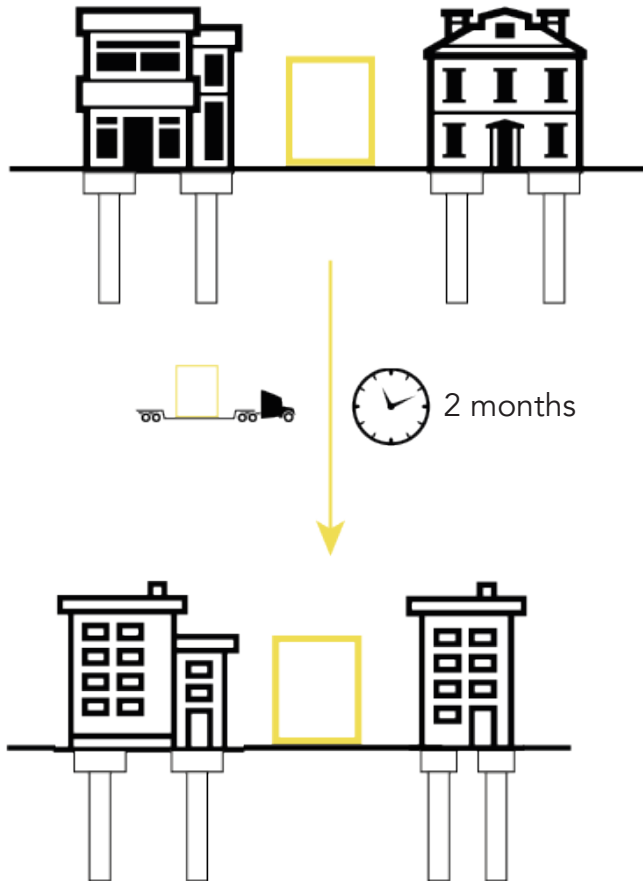
"Citizens should have freedom to act in their own city, the city planning law cut this freedom." (Cirugeda, S. 2014)

DISRUPTING SPACE

urban playground

cirugeda applied for a
standard skip license

made possible by
nearby construction site

permit is approved

skip delivered
to site

CYCLE OF OCCUPATION

with correct license there was
nothing the authorities could
do

**finding a loop-
hole in the policy
the space is able
to be prefigured
by the urban
playground**

point of
prefiguration

cirugeda and his team
transform the skip into a seesaw

cirugeda is summoned to
local police station

community complains

CYCLE OF OCCUPATION OF URBAN PLAYGROUND

DISRUPTING SPACE

Puzzle House Process of Occupation

## PUZZLE HOUSE. SEVILLE

Cirugeda's practice - Recetas Urbanas - used his project puzzle house as a prototype whereby they would occupy empty lots for a maximum of two months.

The property has no foundations and is not intended to become part of the permanent structure and so is considered a chattel instead of real estate. They can be "transported from one place to another with no effects on the immovable thing to which it is connected" (art. 335 of the Civil Code) They are regarded as moveable objects rather than property.

This form of 'pacifist activism' disrupts the status quo in the way in which it appears in the space. It doesn't take the traditional form of protest but instead by occupying a space in a novel way it can illuminate the issue of housing in Spain (Thorpe, Ann. 2014).

DISRUPTING SPACE

structure

linked

property policy

no structure
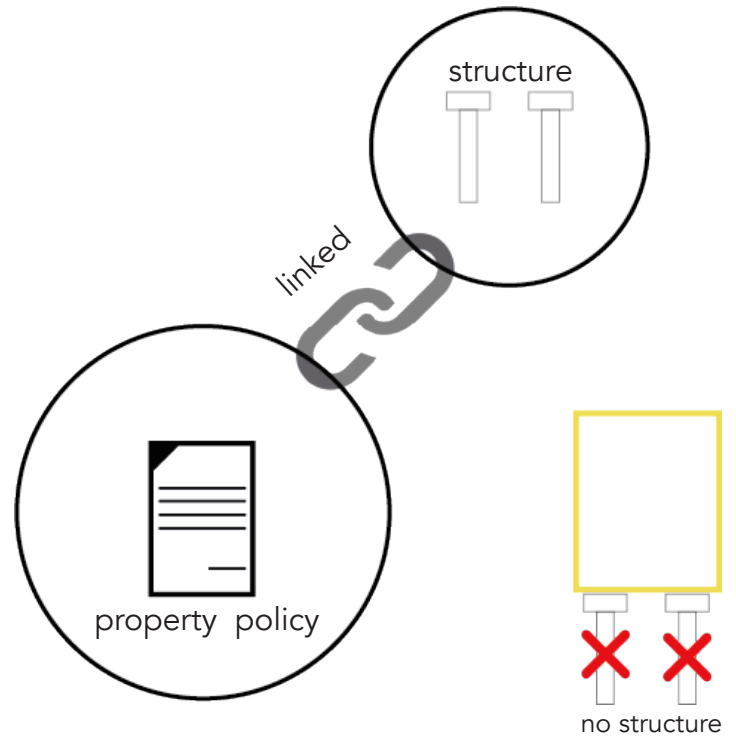
DISRUPTING CONSTRUCTION

# INCREMENTAL HOUSING STRATEGY
FILIPE BALESTRA & SARA GORANSSON







The Incremental Housing Strategy is a scheme developed by Filipe Balestra and Sara Goransson to transform informal slums in Mumbai, India into urban districts. They propose to do this incrementally. Instead of demolishing whole buildings, rendering the occupants homeless, the idea is to gradually improve the dwelling through re-building in stages. This form of urban regeneration means communities aren't uprooted and 'neighbours remain neighbours, local remains local' (Dezeen. 2009).
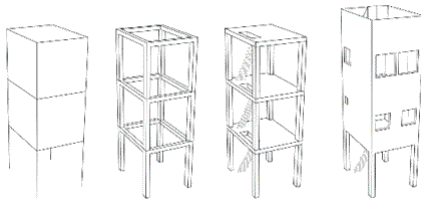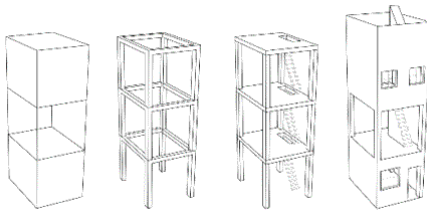
DISRUPTING CONSTRUCTION

House A
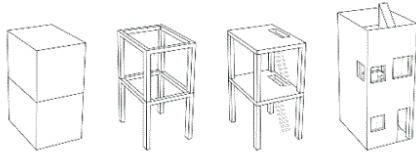
House B

House C

The strategy provides 3 different house typologies.
House A is a two-storey one with the possbility of an incremental future vertical extension to create a three-storey property.
House B has an incremental ground floor, left as open space for a parking space or a shop.
House C has an incremental middle floor that can be used as a living room or clothes store.
The scheme allows the residents to make the choice about what sort of property they wish to live in (Dezeen. 2009).

*Slums, marginal areas, low-income communities, barrios and so forth are included in the police order by their exclusion. Their territories, their histories and their societal features, although neither homogeneous nor reducible to the same categories, legitimise – participatory – interventions. (Boano, C. and Kelling, E. 2013)*

Image Source:
Dezeen. 2009.
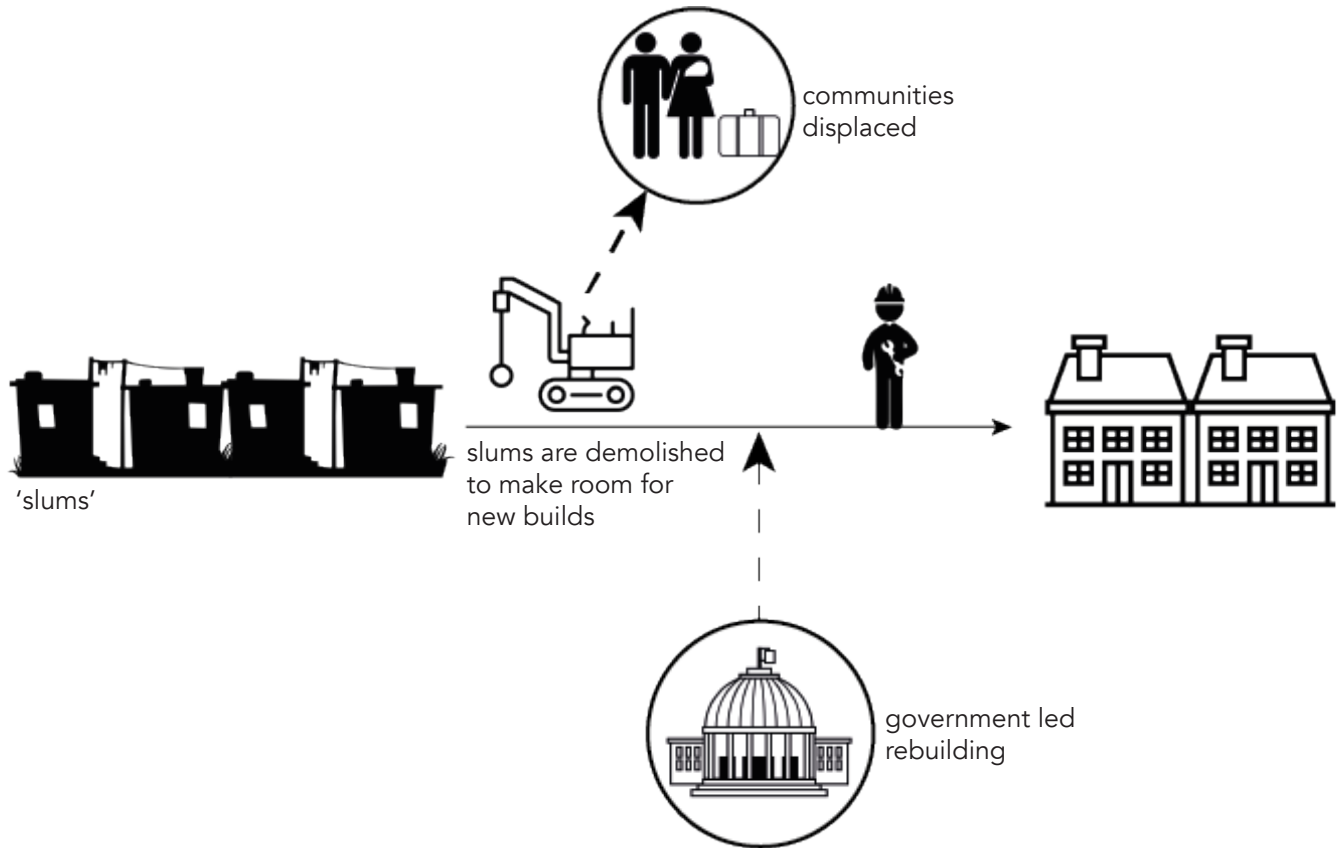
DISRUPTING CONSTRUCTION

Actor Network Theory or ANT attempts to identify what 'needs to be carried out to "knit together" human actors and non-human actors, the technical and the non-technical, with the aim to reveal ways in which networks and relations are assembled and maintained, and thus made "social" (or not)' (Jones, P. and Card, K. 2011).

This project is an example of how, by partnering the technical (the architects) with the non-technical (the slum community), they can successfully change their own circumstances without the need for reliance on the state.
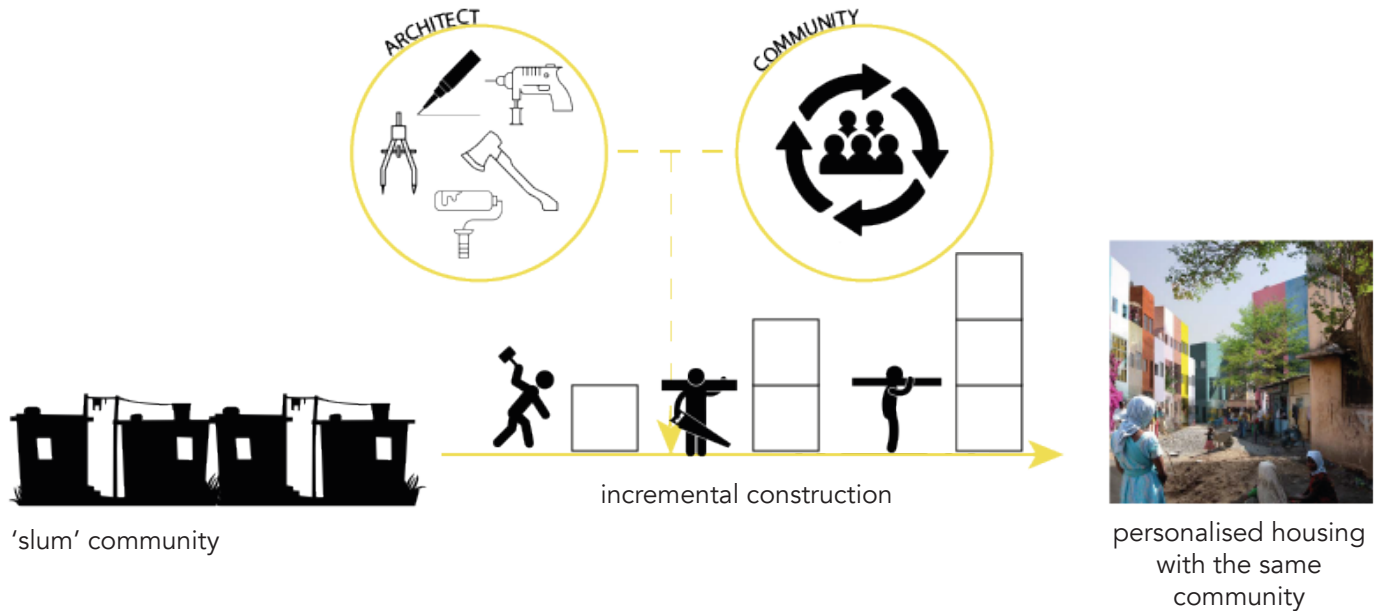
DISRUPTING CONSTRUCTION

# COMMUNITY DISPLACEMENT

communities
displaced

slums are demolished
to make room for
new builds

'slums'

government led
rebuilding

# COMMUNITY LED CONSTRUCTION



ARCHITECT

COMMUNITY

incremental construction

'slum' community

personalised housing
with the same
community

A criticism of the project is that communities are asked to engage in the construction process by customising each house. The way they are asked to do that is to paint the house the colour they want.
This notion of community involvement falls short of what Thorpe would suggest as a PE (Protest Event). For it to qualify as a form of protest requires that numbers be involved so that the criteria for it to be a collective are met. (Thorpe, A. 2014). We could argue that the attempt to involve the community via individuals relating to each house in the 'construction' through painting is both patronising but also ineffective as a form of community disruption and is merely a romanticised ideology of the architects.
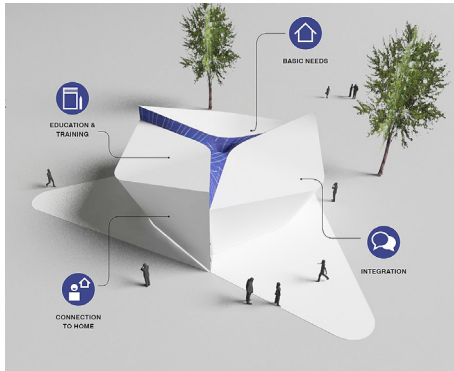
*"social architecture" as an inherently romanticised and ideologically-motivated self-representation authored and fostered by architects..." (Thorpe, A. 2014)*

Image Source: Dezeen. 2009.

DISRUPTING CONSTRUCTION

# UNSTUDIOs
## BLOOM REFUGEE CHALLENGE



BLOOM INTRODUCTORY PROPOSAL

*' "social architecture" reflects some fundamental tensions'*
*(Jones, P and Card, K)*

2015 saw the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe. As a response to this UNStudios, along with What Design Can Do, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the IKEA Foundation, have asked the design community to come up with ideas and proposals for how to improve the lives of refugees.  As psychologist, Kurt Lewin states "behaviour is the function of a person within their environment" (Garrett, H.E. 1939) and this is reflected in UNStudios's belief that by creating appropriate spaces we can improve the ways in which people interact with one another. (UNStudios. 2016)



Image Source:
UNStudios. 2016.

DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO
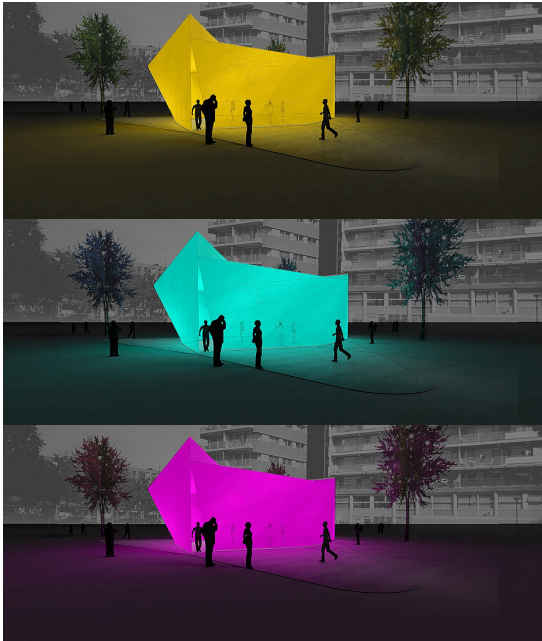
INTERACTIVE SMART SPACE

*'alternative development process in which the people [...] are at the centre of a process of transforming their lives, settlements and position in the city' (Boano, C. and Kelling, E. 2013)*

Bloom's core idea is that through construction and the principle of working together it can change the negative associations of refugees and improve the community - both local residents and refugees.
Social programmes of creating, learning and sharing can be used as an effective tool against xenophobia and fear. (UNStudios. 2016)
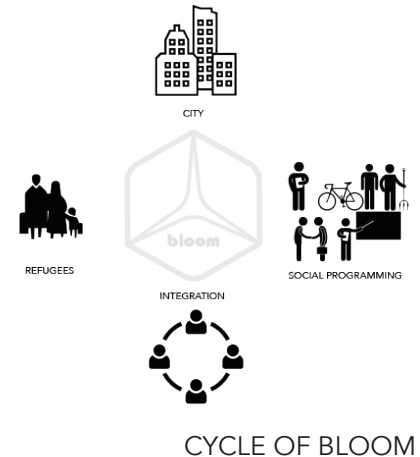


CITY

REFUGEES

bloom

INTEGRATION

SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

CYCLE OF BLOOM

Image Source:
UNStudios. 2016.

DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO

SPREADING OF EDUCATION



Bloom's 'pacifying critique' of the way in which the refugee crisis has currently been handled is a powerful message as well as a practical solution in which 'participation serves to uphold an image of democracy' (Boano, C. and Kelling, E. 2013). These refugee constructions are a reflection of societal conditions where the need for education and integration is growing.
It is not enough that we merely discuss these issues but that we act upon them, similarly to Rancière criticising 'structuralist Marxists for upholding the elitist intellectual superiority of the philosopher over the worker instead of arguing for the need not to interpret, but to listen to the voice of the excluded as equals' (Chamber, S. A. 2010).

The project could be criticised as naive for it assumes that simply involving the local community would be sufficient for successful integration of refugees. It ignores the fact that local conditions (material, economic and social) could be such that the community would not or could not participate in the required way.

Image Source:
UNStudios. 2016.

DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO

# CONCLUSION

All of the practices/projects I have introduced are prefigurative though some more successfully than others.

A key element to each one is that of community involvement. All of them either engage with the community when designing the space or actively use the communtiy to help build the space.

By using these individuals or initiatives on small scale projects the practices or architects are avoiding the need to jump through bureaucratic hoops.

Some of these projects can be criticised as 'ideologically-motivated self-representation fostered by architects'. Without sincerely grounding these projects on the needs, desires and vision of the community the end they want them to achieve will be more likely to fail.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENTS PROGRESS TOWARDS CHANGE

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