

# **POP-UP CITY**

PARTICIPATION OR AUTONOMY IN ARCHITECTURE

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in “bottom-up” or “informal” practice within the discourse of architecture and urbanism. Largely coinciding with the recent global financial crisis, bottom-up initiatives have become an irresistibly compelling way for architects to distance themselves from the failures of neo-liberal planning by re-engaging with the city in a direct way. As a result, the role of the socially responsible architect has drifted towards becoming a facilitator of informal processes and subsequently away from any meaningful consideration of architectural form. The friendliness with which the bottom-up is portrayed leaves a fundamental question unanswered, in a world of self-built cities, what is the role of the architect? This thesis is not a history of bottom-up initiatives, nor a research project of case studies. Rather it sets out to critically re-visit the bottom-up and develop an *architecture* that embraces its inhabitants as an active, dynamic and integral component of the city.

By visiting a specific set of examples, this thesis illustrates that the appeal of the bottom-up is at its most basic level, a yearning to regain some degree of autonomy in the space of the city, a quality that is often mistaken for “participation” or “involvement.” This thesis proposes a renewed interest in the role of architectural form to explicitly define a space for autonomy and to legitimize an alternative to the heteronomy of capitalism in the city today. This will be complemented by a design project, a hypothesis for an event architecture, Festival City.

## RETURN TO PLUG-IN CITY

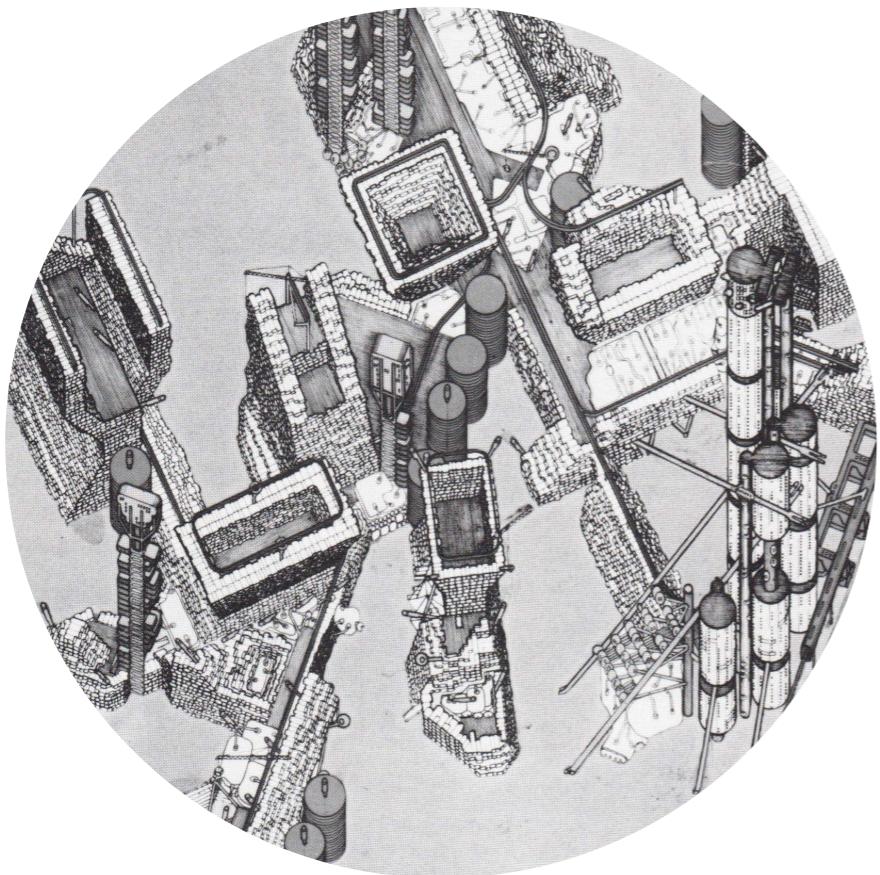


Figure 1.  
Peter Cook, Plug-In City,  
Axonometric, 1964.

On a sunny summer day in downtown Seattle, I came across a poster stapled onto an ordinary telephone pole. It quietly advertised an album release party at a local record store, with a cursory note at the bottom introducing a local food truck that would be parked outside to serve drinks and food. This observation is significant not as an advertisement of the success of the food truck movement, nor about the surprising persistence of record stores in the age of iTunes. But that the vision of Archigram's Plug-In City is in its own way quickly becoming reality. Need a restaurant? A restaurant module is available to be "plugged in." The humble food truck parked outside a strip mall is a far cry from the capsules and megastructures of Plug-In City, but manifests in a most direct way, the central ethos of Archigram.

Over the years there has been a tendency to categorize the work of Archigram as a technocratic utopian project. Spawned in the euphoria of the 60's, the futurist and pro-consumerist tendencies of Archigram have often been interpreted as the ideological drivers of the group. However, one could argue that there is an alternative legacy to the megastructures embraced by the spiritual successors to Archigram. If one considers the work of contemporaries such as Yona Friedman, his investigations into the Villa Spatiale expressed a sentiment entirely different from the



Figure 2.  
Album Release Party



L. Panel study, the extra rigidity of the curved panels allowed them to be used as both roof and wall elements.  
R. Extension to Centre Pompidou using Villa Spatiale principle.

1. The practicality of Friedman's investigations into possible self-building techniques is strongly juxtaposed with his megastructure frames.  
See Friedman, Y. (2006). *Yona Friedman: Pro Domo*, 214-234.

2. Sadler, S. (2005). *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture*, 16.

3. Centre Pompidou - Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano- Constructed 1986-Due to the expense of reconfiguring vertical circulation the floors are fixed. "The absence of columns seems to be related to the original idea of adjustable floors. Now that they are of fixed and uniform height, the space feels definitely too compressed and this impression is accentuated by the deep lattices." See Beck, H., & Spring, M. (1977). Centre Pompidou. *Architectural Design*, 47 (2), 100. Also Hardingham, S., & Rattenbury, K. (2011). *Richard Rogers: The Pompidou Centre: SuperCrit #3*.

lego-like simplicity of Archigram's plug-in capsules. Friedman's studies for panel components and connection details express a clear desire to very literally make the configurable components of the spatial city a reality<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, the casual nature of Archigram's Pop art aesthetic savoured the *potential* of a dynamic city and sought to express that excitement with whatever means available.

Plug-In City was not merely a manifestation of technological euphoria, but an attempt to find an alternative to the limitations of modernist planning. As Simon Sadler writes, "If city planning had traditionally encouraged contemplation of the fixed and ideal architectural object, plug-in planning promoted architecture as an *event* that could only be realized by the active involvement of its inhabitants."<sup>2</sup> The paradox of Archigram's legacy was their success in translating these dynamic processes into a recognizable *aesthetic*. The lineage of Archigram's influence, from the Metabolists to the Centre Pompidou by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano,<sup>3</sup> can be attributed more to the compelling aesthetic legacy left behind by Archigram than to the central ethos of the Plug-In City, the city as a *collective event*.

Today, the Plug-In City remains one of Archigram's most compelling projects. Though its 60's Pop Art aesthetic has long been superseded, its legacy as an alternative to the city as a static and idealized object appeals to a sentiment of the city as a cooperative space and as a constantly evolving endeavour. For us, as citizens of (a/any/the) city, the imposing figure of the master planned city continues to feel at odds with our own experience of living in the city. The Plug-In City offers the idea of a city that could very literally change and grow with us, and more importantly, manifest our own contribution to the city in a physical and concrete way.

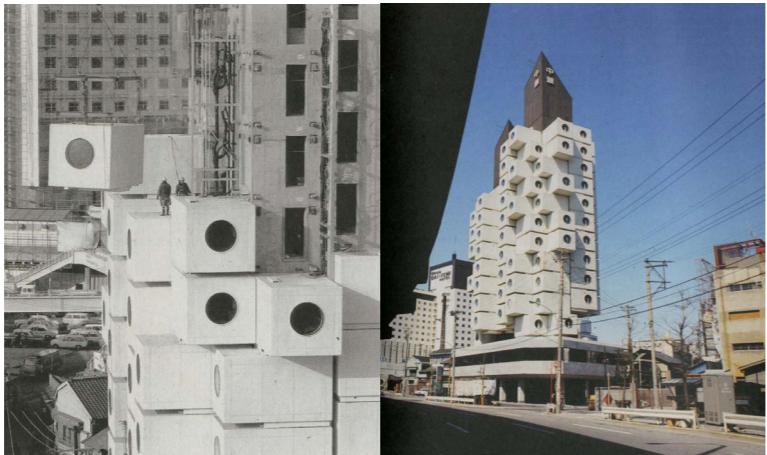


Figure 4.  
Kiro Kurokawa, Nakagin Capsule Tower  
“Nakagin capsule, plugged into the core with only four bolts, theoretically removable...”  
Koolhaas, R., & Obrist, H. U. (2011). Project Japan: Metabolism Talks, 388.

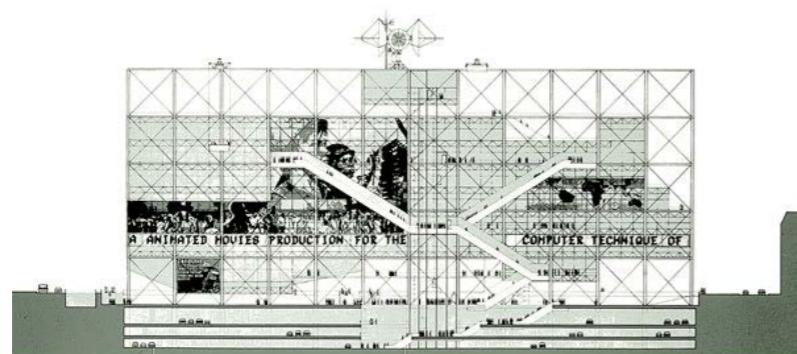


Figure 5.  
Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, Centre Pompidou  
Competition Section, 1970.  
Competition entry with open floors that can be adjusted to various heights.

4. The image of a construction crane or possibly a helicopter dropping in a capsule from above comes to mind.

5. Recently at the Tallinn Architecture Biennale, Berlin based office Raumlabor described themselves as the fire department of urban space. See 8 TAB 2013 discussion 2. (2013). [vimeo.com](http://vimeo.com)

In this light, the euphoria and excitement of contemporary bottom-up initiatives, from community gardens to food trucks and pop-up markets, speaks to a similar instinctive understanding of the city as a collective undertaking. That as citizens of the city, the city should be a reflection of our dreams and ambitions and not be dictated by the decisions of a select few. For a public that feels increasingly ostracized by the influence of real estate speculation and political theatre, bottom-up events provided a suitable platform for participation and involvement in the realization of the city. Within the discourse of architecture and urbanism, participation and involvement have become the buzzwords for a profession eager to re-establish its civic agency by engaging directly with the greater public as a whole.

Yet, despite its similar ambitions, the Plug-In City was a fundamentally different architectural project from the recent proliferation of bottom-up projects today. Even in name, Plug-In City<sup>4</sup> stands completely opposite to the bottom-up processes advocated by architects and planners. Filled with ambiguous rhetoric of creating places of meeting, workshops and discussion, the friendliness of the bottom up as a solution to the imbalances of the contemporary city has led to a retreat within the discourse of architecture and urbanism from any meaningful consideration of the role of architectural *form*. Content with investigating processes of involvement and participatory design, contemporary architects portray themselves as active protagonists<sup>5</sup> that help the wider public facilitate a more democratic construction of the city.

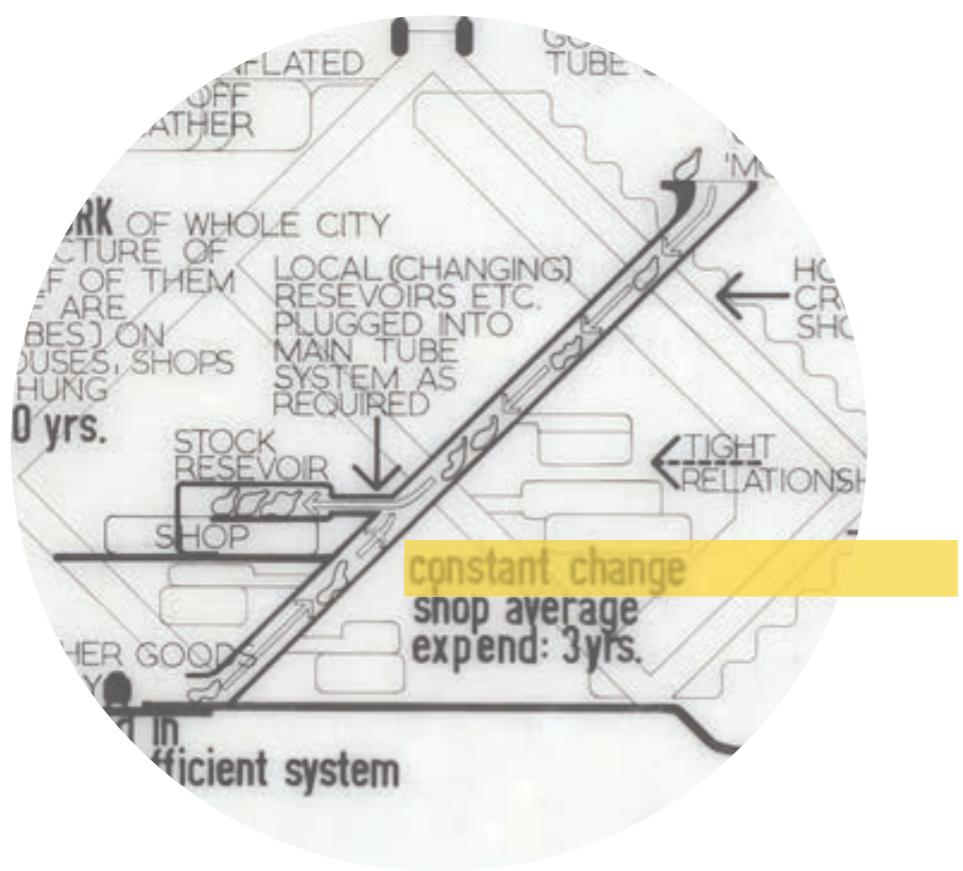


Figure 7.  
Peter Cook, Plug-In City  
Component Diagram  
edited.

The central ethos of the Plug-in City, the city as a collective event, was significant not only as an alternative to the mainstream architectural discourse, but more importantly because it considered the role of *architecture* in facilitating that process. Within this context, this thesis sets out to re-consider contemporary bottom-up practices and to investigate an architecture that embraces its inhabitants as an active, dynamic and integral component of the city.

Welcome to the Pop-Up City.

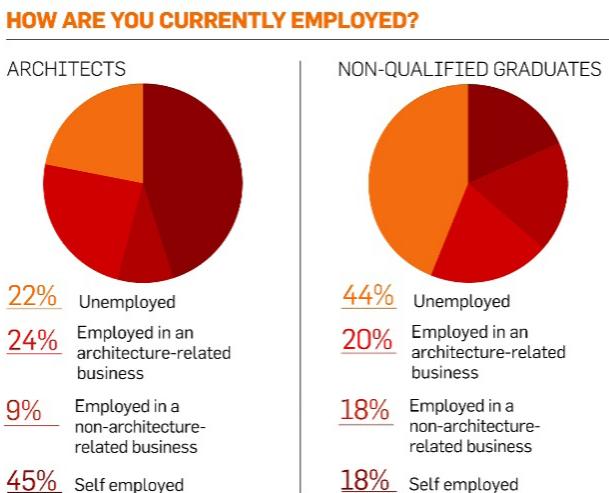


Figure 8.  
L. Burj Khalifa, 2009.  
R. Architecture industry Employment figures, 2009.

## BOTTOM-UP

6. Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, *Burj Khalifa* (2004-2009). Standing at 828m, the 1.5 billion USD tower is worth little under 10% the price of *Whatsapp*, a messaging platform acquired by Facebook in February 2014.

7. Unemployed architect numbers fall for first time in 16 months.(2009). [bdonline.co.uk](http://bdonline.co.uk)

8. Urban Think Tank + Iwan Baan win golden lion at venice biennale. (2012). [designboom.com](http://designboom.com)

The recent fascination with bottom-up initiatives largely coincides with the dramatic impact of the Global Financial Crisis on the profession of architecture. In many ways the failures of neo-liberal planning have led to the somewhat paradoxical situation, which simultaneously saw the construction of the world's tallest building<sup>6</sup> with over a quarter of the architectural profession unemployed<sup>7</sup>. Marginalized to extremes of fashionable excess or general disillusionment from the public, discourse in architecture and urbanism attempted to distance itself from the neo-liberal agenda by turning to the variety of self empowered movements that sprung up in the wake of the recession.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the awarding of the 2012 Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale to the Urban Think Tank, Justin Mcguirk and Iwan Baan exhibition<sup>8</sup> documenting the self-building process of the Torre David in Caracas, Venezuela. Abandoned in the late 90's, the incomplete 45-storey tower stood for many years as monument to the 1994 collapse of the Venezuelan banking system until 2007 when families began moving into the unfinished structure. Over the following years, the Torre David has become a veritable vertical city, entirely self-built and without regulation, the exhibition tells an inspiring story of the self-building process, a celebration of the informal



Figure 9.  
Iwaan Baan, (Photographer) Torre David



Figure 10.  
Torre David Gran Horizonte 2012  
Exhibition  
The televisions continuously play videos of daily life in the tower.

9. Header statement. (n.d.)  
[torredavid.com](http://torredavid.com)

community dynamics that makes the Torre David possible. Urban Think Tank “issues a call to arms to their fellow architects to see in the informal settlements of the world a potential for innovation and experimentation, with the goal of putting design in the service of a more equitable and sustainable future.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the embrace of the informal, or bottom-up as an urban strategy also leaves a large question unanswered, in a world of self-built cities, what is the role of the architect?

Perhaps it’s telling that the “built” component to the exhibit was an artificial recreation of the self-built aesthetic in the form of a fictional cafe. Serving local Venezuelan cuisine, the restaurant and exhibition attempted to let visitors experience public life in the tower. Yet the juxtaposition of artificial “slumminess” with the carefully composed photographs documenting the very real daily struggles of the inhabitants, lends the exhibition an air of vicarious participation that feels at times to glamorize the poverty and social problems at work.

While the sentiment and execution of the exhibition was undoubtedly a success, its recognition with the Golden Lion reflects a worrying propensity for architects to imagine themselves as part of these informal processes, to consider themselves as either better initiators or facilitators of than those already involved.<sup>10</sup> The tangible appeal of the bottom-up (especially after the global financial crisis), continues to resonate as a more equitable or democratic approach to building the city. With architects, hurrying to present themselves as the leaders.

10. This tendency is further highlighted by Urban Think Tank’s proposals for possible architectural interventions into the self-built structure.  
See Beyond Torre David. (2013).  
[designboom.com](http://designboom.com)



## GARDEN

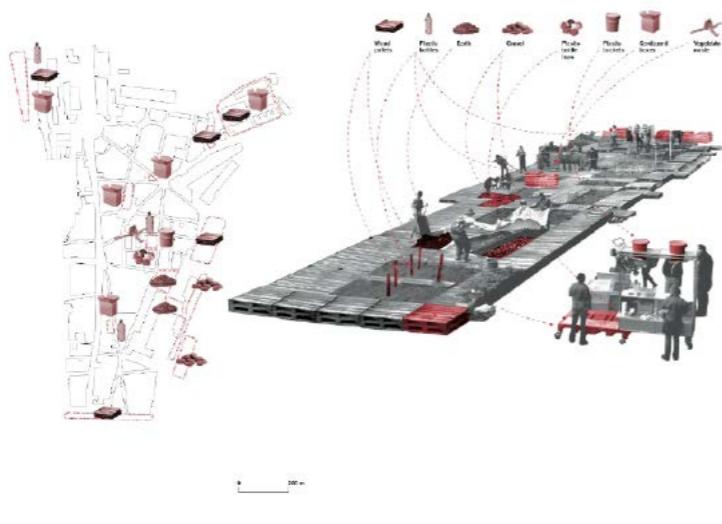


Figure 11.  
AAA, Ecobox 1993  
Garden built from recycled shipping palettes, the designers envisioned it as part of a larger process to activate the entire neighbourhood.

11. The first community gardens were established in the 1970's in New York in response to urban and financial crisis. Volunteers transformed the abandoned site and the city approved the lease for the lot at the price of 1\$ USD a month.  
See Liz Christy Garden. (n.d) [lizchristy.us](http://lizchristy.us)

12. Eco-Urban Network / Ecobox. (n.d). [urbantactics.org](http://urbantactics.org)

Given the financial and political limitations of bottom up or informal urbanism, the traditional tools and devices with which architects can engage with urban space are not readily at their disposal. Instead rather than investigating the nature of architectural *form*, they become builders or facilitators of *processes*. Though the sheer variety of successful examples is difficult to document in a meaningful way, it is perhaps best illustrated by considering the typology which is arguably the epitome of bottom-up urbanism, the community garden.

By no means a new phenomenon<sup>11</sup>, the popularity and success of the community garden as a strategy for reviving urban space has rendered it the poster child of a socially responsible and ecological typology of architecture and urbanism. One of the most notable examples is the ECObox by Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (AAA - Studio for Self-managed Architecture). Located in the 18th arrondissement of Paris, ECObox was the core project to initiate a process to "preserve urban 'biodiversity' by encouraging the co-existence of a wide range of life-styles and living practices."<sup>12</sup> Consisting of a series of communal gardens constructed from re-used shipping palettes, the ECObox was realized through a process of self-building with the local community. In the words of AAA, ECObox became a "platform for urban criticism and creativity, which is curated by the AAA members, residents and external



Figure 12.  
AAA, Ecobox, detail  
Material and budget limitations offer design challenges that become satisfying in their own way.

13. Ibid.

14. Also often known as *spatial practice*, a term borrowed from Lefebvre.

15. Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*, 26.

16. Stanek, L. *Henri Lefebvre on Space: Architecture, Urban Research, and the Production of Theory*, p. ix

17. Petcou, C., & Petrescu, D. (n.d.). *The crisis of the capitalist space*.

18. Ibid.

19. During a time of crisis, the community garden became a means of providing subsistence and welfare within the domain of architecture and urbanism.

collaborators.”<sup>13</sup> Largely influenced by the philosophy of Henri Lefebvre, AAA act as curators and enablers of space, through the *social production of space*.<sup>14</sup>

In Lefebvre’s seminal work, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that “(social) space is a (social product).”<sup>15</sup> Drawing on Marxist philosophy, Lefebvre looks to social production of space as a form of resistance to capitalist modes of production. The social production of space “implies the shift of the research perspective from space to *processes* of its production; the embrace of the multiplicity of spaces that are socially produced and made productive in social practices.”<sup>16</sup> For AAA where the space of city is largely “smoothed over by the forces of Capitalism”<sup>17</sup> they have chosen to invest their energies into the spaces left behind, “the grooves, cracks, breaches and loop-holes.”<sup>18</sup> The legacy of AAA, especially in the wake of the financial crisis, has invested the socially conscious architect with a duty to operate within these gaps, to act as rescuers of urban space left behind by the neo-liberal agenda.

As a project, the community garden becomes on the surface, an unquestionably compelling way with which to engage with the city. Due to the virtually non-existent budget, the use of recycled or improvised materials becomes creatively satisfying in its own way. While the low economic obstacles and near universal public support remove many of the obstacles that had previously limited idealism in architecture. For a profession almost permanently in crisis, the decisiveness and tangibility<sup>19</sup> of the community garden makes it irresistible for the well-intentioned architect. As the facilitator of initiatives from the greater public, architects discovered themselves once again, the protagonists of the city.

It is precisely the friendliness of the community garden,



"this doesn't have your name on it,"  
"where's your name bitch?"

Figure 13.  
Crazy Rhubarb Lady  
Video of a confrontation between two parties over a rhubarb patch.  
The video quickly went viral on Youtube.

20. Thievery, Fraud, Fistfights and Weed: The Other Side of Community Gardens. (2013). [modernfarmer.com](http://modernfarmer.com).

21. Vancouver offered tax breaks for property developers going through the multi-year development approval process. By transforming these sites into community gardens, the property could be placed in a lower tax bracket. Estimated loss in tax revenue is upwards of a million dollars per lot. The public is largely unaware of this cost. See Lee, J and Hager, M. (2013). Explosive growth of Vancouver's urban gardens prompts confrontations. [vancouversun.com](http://vancouversun.com)

22. ECOBOX- Self-Managed Eco-Urban network. (n.d) [urbaninform.net](http://urbaninform.net)

23. Also "sustainable design"

and similarly bottom-up urbanism that renders it practically immune to closer scepticism. Indeed, one can hardly argue against the re-use of vacant sites while addressing the much maligned lack of green space in the contemporary city. Nor could one argue with engaging directly with communities to foster a sense of activity and dynamism in the city. Yet, well-documented examples of theft or vandalism<sup>20</sup> show that despite its name, community gardens are not only havens of neighbourly bliss. The seemingly no-cost initiative of creating a community garden often carries an unseen price, as the occupation of vacant sites makes the community garden a convenient tax-break for developers.<sup>21</sup> The success of a community garden ultimately makes it a possible engine for increased gentrification. For the five years ECObox was running, the subsequent rise in property values led the owners of the lot to evict ECObox in order to develop more lucrative projects.<sup>22</sup>

This is by no means meant to diminish the sentiment or successes of bottom-up urbanism, but to illustrate the *vulnerability* of the informal project. By confining the role of the socially-responsible architect to one who operates outside the formal structures of top-down planning,<sup>23</sup> bottom-up urbanism reflects a worrying tendency to avoid confronting the greater forces at work in the city.



Figure 14.  
Occupy Wall Street New York, (2011), Poster.  
So... what was that one demand again?

## STRUCTURELESSNESS

The appeal of the “bottom-up” as a response to the hegemony of “top-down” power lies in its very literal attempt to better reflect the interests of society at large. For architecture and urbanism, a profession frustrated with satisfying the interests of profit-hungry developers and politicians, engaging with the community through bottom-up processes became an opportunity to facilitate a more democratic construction of the city and possibly society as a whole. This wholesale rejection of the perceived inequalities stemming from top-down planning processes are in many ways directly parallel to the aims of the Occupy Wall Street movement; where the slogan, “We are the 99%” became the clarion call for a public that sought to fight back against a system that placed the accumulation of wealth for a select few above the interests of the greater population.

However, as we begin to reach the final stages of recovery from the financial crisis, it has become clear that despite all the popular attention, the imbalances illuminated by the Occupy Wall Street have only further increased.<sup>24</sup> With income inequality reaching new levels not seen in the past century,<sup>25</sup> the failure of Occupy Wall Street to enact any meaningful change beyond a satisfying moment of collective frustration is a worrying lesson for society. While the reasons for the failure of Occupy are numerous,

24. Urgent action needed to tackle rising inequality and social divisions, says OECD. (2014). [oecd.org](http://oecd.org)

25. See Thomas Piketty’s bestseller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

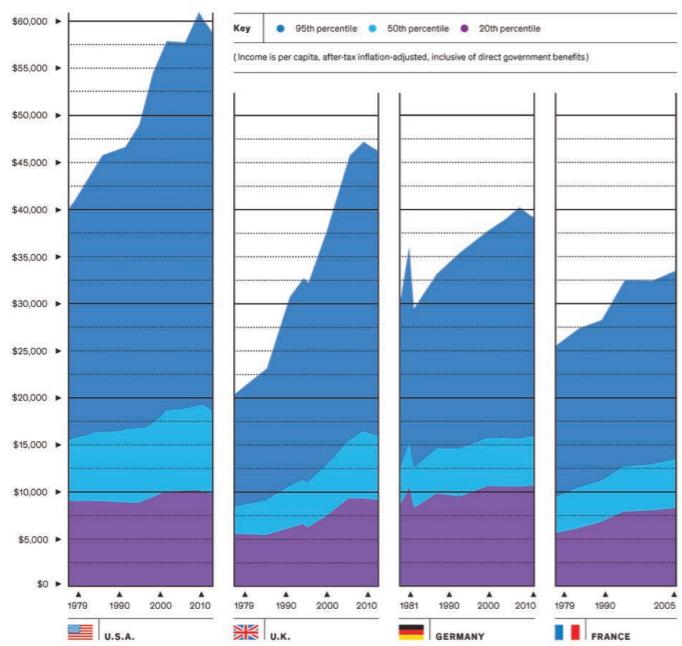


Figure 15.  
Graph depicting income survey data across multiple countries from the 1970's to present.

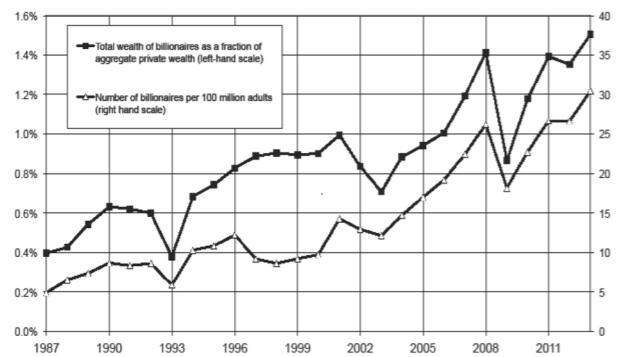


Figure 16.  
Piketty, Thomas. Billionaire income as a fraction of global population and wealth 1987-2013.

26. Decisions within Occupy needed to reach 90% consensus otherwise it would be dropped, See Sorkin, A.R, *Occupy Wall Street: A Frenzy That Fizzled*. (2012). [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)

27. The “uncomplicated” demand for DEMOCRACY NOT COPORATOCRACY. See White, Micah. #OCCUPYWALLSTREET. (2011). [adbusters.org](http://adbusters.org)

28. Freedman, J. (n.d.). The Tyranny of Structurelessness. [jofreedman.com](http://jofreedman.com).

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

the deliberate rejection of leadership<sup>26</sup> ultimately rendered Occupy harmless from the outset. Moreover, the virtually non-existent political agenda<sup>27</sup> of the movement only further cemented the unwillingness to address the structural issues at hand.

In “The Tyranny of Structurelessness”, Jo Freedman proposes that the unequivocal rejection of structure prevents such movements from growing beyond an awareness raising endeavour, as “any group of people of whatever nature that comes together for any length of time for any purpose will inevitably structure itself in some fashion.”<sup>28</sup> The rejection of top-down structure has led to a situation where the idea of “structurelessness” does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones. Rather, the idea of a structureless group “becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others.”<sup>29</sup> While levelled primarily as criticism towards left-wing and feminist groups, the rejection of structure is in many ways the ultimate goal of capitalism as “laissez-faire philosophy did not prevent the economically powerful from establishing control over wages, prices, and distribution of goods; it only prevented the government from doing so.”<sup>30</sup>

The argument is surprisingly prescient in the context of bottom-up urbanism. The rejection of top-down planning in favour of informal strategies exposes a fundamental deficiency as a strategy to instigate any lasting change. Unwilling to address broader structural issues of the city, informal urbanism becomes merely a continuation of the imbalanced economic and political forces at work in the city. Moreover, for all their good intentions or idealistic ambitions, the role of the architect as a facilitator for processes of participation ultimately establishes them as the

leaders of those processes. Obsessed with their own power to do good, the almost self-congratulatory discourse on “participation” or “bottom-up” has simply replaced one type of authority for another without providing any decision making power to those who need it the most.

In *Housing by People*, John F.C. Turner stresses the importance of decision making by contrasting the effectiveness of owner-builders with centrally administrated social housing programs in developing and developed countries. Even in wealthy countries social housing must inevitably make certain compromises due to the special constraints of public spending. By design, social housing must relate minimum economic values with maximum social benefit, but these generalized values are determined and imposed by an outside body unable to “satisfy, let alone take advantage of the trade-offs between these complex sets of variable priorities of individual households.”<sup>31</sup>

Turner looks at examples of owner-builders, where the inhabitants are able to invest resources into their properties over time based on their own needs. Unlike social housing that diminishes in value over time, these properties become productive endeavours. For example, a handicapped woman is able to support herself selling fruit by making the necessary modifications to her home. The rigidity of social housing discourages individual decision making and investment and transforms housing from a productive process that accrues value, into a mass produced consumer product. A generalized level of comfort that costs ninety

percent of household income becomes a burden, regardless of how improved the living condition.

No matter how well intentioned, imposing a set of values inhibits personal and local initiatives. As Turner writes, “Participation does not necessarily imply self-help home building by undernourished and over-worked people without credit, with inadequate tools and poor materials... The central issue is that of control and power to decide.”<sup>32</sup> If we are truly to consider the equal or democratic construction of the city, architecture must address the question of *autonomy*.

32. Ibid., 133.

31. Turner, J. F.C. (1976). *Housing By People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments (Ideas in Progress)*. 106.

## AUTONOMY



Figure 17.  
Power House

Power House Productions started in Detroit at the brink of the recession. Purchased for only \$1900 USD, this former drug house has been renovated into a residence for visiting artists. This strategy has been employed throughout the neighbourhood amidst plummeting real estate values, purchasing vacant or abandoned properties with a mission for neighbourhood stabilisation.

Despite the flaws of informal urbanism, one cannot help but remain optimistic at its basic premise. Qualities of community participation, dynamism and an ability to operate with minimal economic assets are all worthy revisiting as an aspirational project for the city. However in the discourse of imbalances in society during the economic crisis, the highly visible successes of informal projects caused a fundamental misunderstanding of the true project of informal urbanism. More than processes of engagement, any discussion of the “bottom-up” or the “99%” is at its most basic level a yearning to regain some *autonomy* for the individual.

When considered within the context of autonomy, the nature of informal urbanism as a strategy was far more effective than Occupy Wall Street ever could be. More than just a high profile protest, these informal strategies were a very direct result of the needs and desires of a population reclaiming space in the city itself. The success and popularity of these projects became valued for its contribution to public space and since it directly involved the inhabitants, it became accepted as a more democratic approach to the city. Once understood as a strategy for activating urban space and no longer a strategy for autonomy, the underlying premise and quality of informal urbanism was lost. This misunderstanding can be seen with the explosive growth of the food truck phenomenon

in 2007 and its impact on urban space.

While by no means a new phenomenon, the demographics and character of the food truck shifted away from hot dogs and construction sites, to high quality gourmet food made accessible to all parts of the city. For one of the industries hit hardest by the recession, restaurants all around the US had to adapt to a clientele less willing to cope with the expense of dining out. Unable to deal with the costs of maintaining a physical storefront, the shift towards mobile food trucks allowed chefs to reduce overhead costs while expanding their exposure throughout the city. The food truck became a vehicle for many unemployed chefs to start their own businesses and became especially appealing due to the directness of the relationship with their customers.<sup>33</sup> Utilizing social media, the success or failures of the food truck largely hinged upon making good food that people liked and to sell it for a reasonable price. Issues of location, marketing, and managing the complex economics of a conventional restaurant effectively became null and allowed a new degree of autonomy for the ambitious chef.

What is most fascinating is the discrepancy of food truck culture as it spread across North America. Inspired by the successes of food trucks in Portland and San Francisco, food trucks were proposed as an exciting solution to the “No-Fun” reputation that has plagued Vancouver for years.<sup>34</sup> The municipal government found broad public support for bringing an alternative to the food carts in Vancouver, which had previously only been limited to serving hot dogs in various forms. As a result of the structural reforms to Canadian banks and its position as the premiere North American gateway to Asia, Vancouver did not experience the recession to the same degree as the Portland or San Francisco. Food trucks were introduced specifically for their ability to activate

34. An especially popular issue in the wake of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics

33. Mayyasi, A. (2013). Food Truck Economics. [priceconomics.com](http://priceconomics.com)

35. Klassen, M. Vision Vancouver social engineering results in another food cart setback. (2011). [archive.citycaucus.com](http://archive.citycaucus.com)

36. Local food truck tours are now a common occurrence, “Enjoy amazing Vancouver street food characterized by local, organic, good-for-you decadence.” [foodietours.ca](http://foodietours.ca)

37. See San Francisco STREAT Food Park. [somastreatfoodpark.com](http://somastreatfoodpark.com)

urban space and as such revolved around very specific parameters.

During the initial trial period only fifteen food truck licenses were available by lottery,<sup>35</sup> presumed as the most equitable means of distributing the highly coveted licenses. The ensuing public outcry was remarkably fierce, with the public feeling that far more deserving candidates should be tasked with reviving street life in Vancouver. Unfortunately, rather than creating an open playing field where the public could decide for themselves, the municipal government instead instituted an expert selection committee to identify the most deserving vendors through a series of interviews and taste tests. Inevitably, local, organic and gourmet<sup>36</sup> became the buzzwords of the Vancouver street food scene, though the surprisingly high cost of the food being served was less frequently discussed. Exchanging their business lunches for food truck meals eaten in the park, the food truck became just another vehicle for upper middle class office workers to indulge in a taste of “street life.”

What is most concerning is that the Vancouver food truck model is broadly becoming the norm around the globe. As the competition in food trucks has become increasingly fierce to attract the discerning “foodies.” Food truck owners have found it increasingly lucrative to collectively lease vacant parking lots to set up more comfortable dining areas<sup>37</sup> complete with chairs and tables and sometimes even air conditioning. The absurd extension of the autonomous food truck into an urban typology of what is essentially an outdoor food court is questionable as an urban device that activates the city,

As we look back at the inspiring qualities of informal processes or bottom-up urbanism, its success can largely be attributed to the autonomy it offered to individual participants.



Figure 18.  
Downtown Vancouver, Lunch Hour.

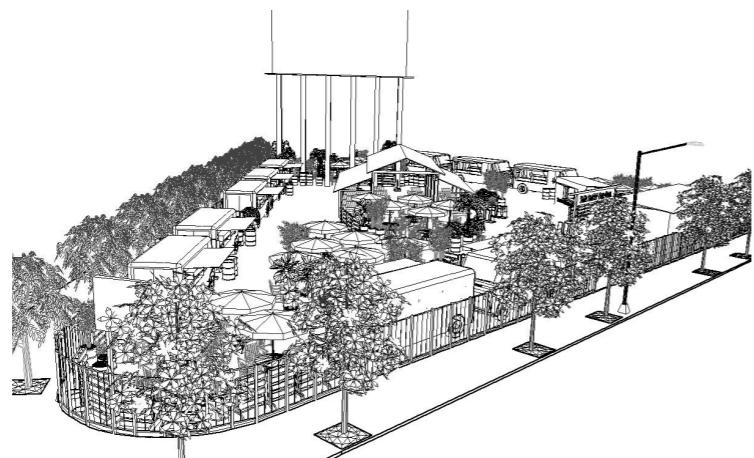


Figure 19.  
San Francisco STREET Food Park.

When considered as tactics or strategies for urban space, the bottom-up ultimately risks being subsumed to the forces it originally set out against. For chefs and restaurant owners, the food truck offered a chance to re-consider how they engaged with the city on their own terms. For them, the financial crisis was not the uniformly paralyzingly event it was made out to be, rather it was a brief moment of autonomy when the heteronomy of capitalism was suspended.



"and for God's sake keep shopping"



Figure 20.  
George W. Bush, Kristin Halvorsen, Just keep shopping!

## LIMIT

38. "Beyond the conscious activity of institutionalization, institutions have drawn their source from the social imaginary. This imaginary must be interwoven with the symbolic, otherwise society could not have 'come together'" Castoriadis, C. (1998). *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. 126.

39. While all institutions are tautological, "Capitalism is the first social regime to produce an ideology according to which it would be rational"  
See Castoriadis, C. *The Rationality of Capitalism*. 83.

40. Especially for atheists

41. See Benjamin, W. (1921).  
*Capitalism as Religion*.

In the context of contemporary society, any discussion of autonomy inevitably must consider the pervasiveness modern of capitalism. Writing on the subject of autonomy, Cornelius Castoriadis defines autonomous societies as those where its members directly create their own institutions. However beyond a certain scale, societies by necessity become heteronomous (other - law) and as such need to legitimize their laws by associating them with a higher power.<sup>38</sup>

In the past, the laws of the church were legitimized through the institution of god. However, in secular Western society, the heteronomy of society is legitimized with capitalist reason.<sup>39</sup> Though on the surface this appears to be a harmless proposition,<sup>40</sup> the realization of a society determined solely by market forces is a worrying prospect. The position of capitalism gives it a credibility and legitimacy that unlike the divine origin of past institutions has no need to be "good" or "just." In the words of Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism is the only religion without mercy."<sup>41</sup>

The pervasiveness of the heteronomy of capitalism is further expanded by Ingrid Straume, as the undesirable externalities in the wake of the crisis should have undermined

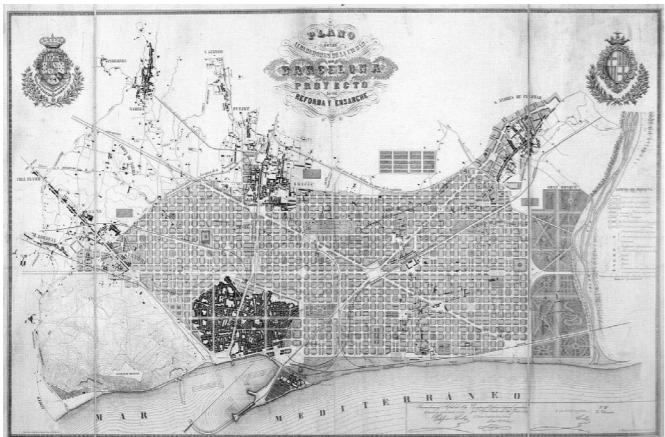


Figure 21.  
Idelfons Cerdà, Plan for Barcelona, 1860.

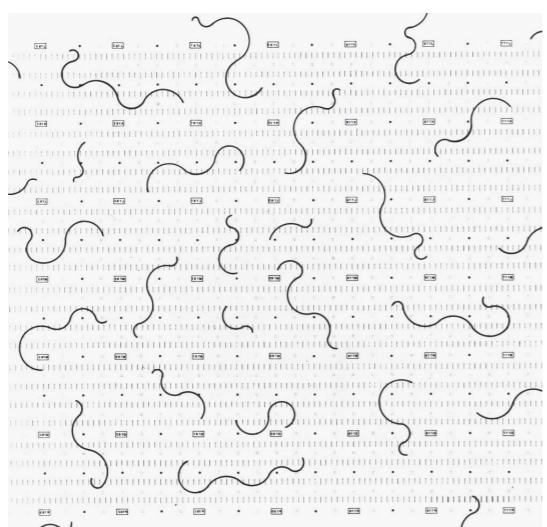


Figure 22.  
Archizoom Associati, NO-STOP City, 1968-1972.

42. See Straume, Ingrid. (2011). *The Political Imaginary of Global Capitalism*.

43. Ibid., 28.

44. "Space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power." Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*, 26.

45. The *polis* and *civitas* are "explicitly political forms of coexistence" and different from "the material condition of cohabitation" Aureli, P. V. (2011). *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, 8.

the rational legitimacy of capitalism.<sup>42</sup> Yet the failure of modern society to conceive of an alternative to capitalism has less to do with economics, but with the general depoliticization of capitalism, which has caused us to focus on the rational outcomes of capitalism without challenging its "political imaginary." This "depoliticization represents a crisis in Western societies' capability to create and reform themselves politically."<sup>43</sup> Straume illustrates this by comparing George W Bush asking Americans to combat terrorism by shopping with the Norwegian Socialist minister of finance encouraging Norwegians to keep shopping in the wake of the crisis.

The all encompassing heteronomy of capitalism on the space of the city is alluded to by Henri Lefebvre as the domineering effect of capitalism<sup>44</sup> on the production of space, the reality of which ultimately considers the city, a financial tool. For Pier Vittorio Aureli, these forces are physically manifested as "a carpet of homogenous urbanization." Tracing a shift in the early first millennium Aureli points to a conception of the city that no longer originates as a political space, like in the Greek *polis* or Roman *civitas*, but one that is propelled by the role of economics.<sup>45</sup> Referencing the origins of the term *urbanization*, Aureli considers Idelfons Cerdà, whose work, *The General Theory of Urbanization*: proposed an expansion of Barcelona through a repeatable grid of 133-by-133 meter blocks. These blocks contained an equal distribution of services, from religious centres to marketplaces so that the grid allowed a potentially infinite level of growth by suppressing the political character of the city. Urbanization therefore became a device that no longer had any "representative or iconic function.. it is what it does: it creates

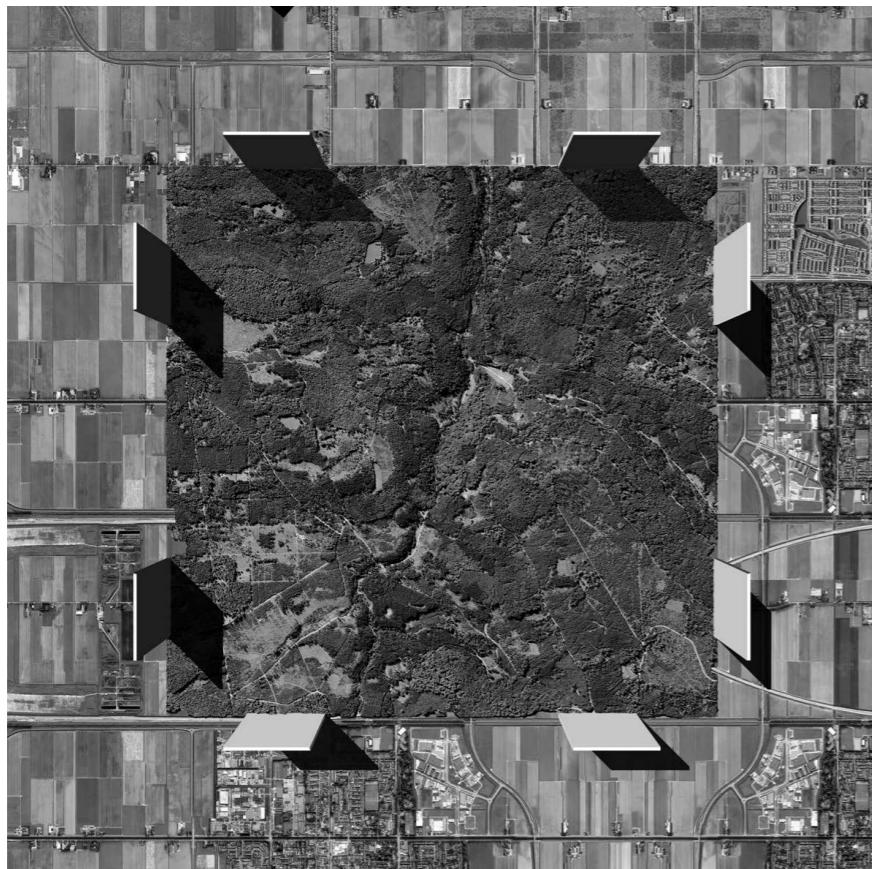


Figure 23.  
DOGMA, STOP CITY, 2007  
Eight 500m x 500m slabs, 25m thick delineating a 3km square of forest.

46. Ibid., 11.

47. See Stop City, in Aureli, P. V., & Tattara, M. (2013). *Dogma: 11 Projects*, 10.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 13.

the best conditions for the reproduction of the labor force.”<sup>46</sup> For Aureli, the smoothness of urbanized space threatens to shift production from the compartmentalized confines of the factory to a condition where every aspect of human life is expected to become a factor in production.<sup>47</sup>

Against these urbanizing forces, Pier Vittorio Aureli proposes a renewed interest in the role of architectural form as a *limit*. This is perhaps best understood by considering the work *Stop City* by his office, DOGMA, which critically appropriates Archizoom’s model of homogenous urbanization, *No-Stop City*.<sup>48</sup> Where *No-Stop City* formalized the infinite expansion of the capitalist metropolis to absurdity, *Stop City* reverses this urban thesis by proposing the city as the *form* of a limit. Composed of eight towers each housing 500,000 inhabitants and arranged around the border of a square of 3 kilometres, each “city within a city” defines the emptiness of an urban void filled with a forest. By positioning itself within the legacy of *No-Stop City*, and fully accepting the nature of urbanization in the contemporary city, *Stop City* considers the possibility for architectural form to become a limit to the smoothness of urbanization, so that “Architecture is no longer as what implies growth, extension, multiplication, flexibility but as a practice that limits such possibility.”<sup>49</sup>



Figure 24.

In the 1996 film *The God of Cookery*, Stephen Chow's character subjects "assorted noodle" a common street food dish to ruthless gastronomic critique. The absurdity of this situation is contrasted with a later scene where a critic at a high class restaurant subjects the same version of the dish dressed up with overly elaborate names to the exact same critique, ending with "so you're saying this is basically street side assorted noodle!"

## TO THE COMMONS

The success of bottom-up initiatives after the crisis was predicated on a moment where the heteronomy of capitalism was suspended. But by providing a *limited* degree of autonomy for the individual, it also offered the possibility of heteronomy understood through a collective contribution to the common good. The limitations of the food truck meant that it could never become a method of maximizing profits, its success was predicated on its ability to positively contribute to the space of the city. Similarly the community garden was never about maximizing crop yields for maximum revenue, but about a collective activity of sharing and subsistence. The potential of autonomy for offering a space for the collective inhabitation of the city is perhaps best illustrated with outdoor food stall of Hong Kong, the dai pai dong (大牌檔).

In 1945, Hong Kong was faced with the daunting task of supporting the families of injured and deceased civil servants in the aftermath of World War II. For a colonial government recovering from the brutal conflict, there simply were no funds for social assistance and housing. Instead the city took the unorthodox step of issuing each family an ad-hoc food license so they could earn a living by selling food. For one of the densest cities in the



Figure 25.

Dai Pai Dong at Ngau Tau Kok, Hong Kong

Occupying a special place in the collective memory of Hong Kong, the dai pai dong is frequently used as a cinematic device in Hong Kong cinema. Whether it be gangsters negotiating or a couple on a date, the dai pai dong is the common ground of Hong Kong.

50. Normal restaurants were required to have at least one toilet. See Li, R. YM. (2010). The rise and fall of cooked food stalls (dai pai dong) agglomerations.

51. The dai pai dong is now almost extinct, as the non-transferrable licenses have gradually disappeared as the owners have passed away. The loss of such a vital element of Hong Kong culture has been deeply felt and there are now widespread calls to bring back the dai pai dong. It remains to be seen if it can be implemented as autonomous action, or a means for reviving "street-life"

world-where space limitations made cooking at home challenging, the dai pai dong became the de facto "canteen (飯堂)" for the majority of Hong Kong.

The dai pai dong flourished because it sidestepped many of the regulations<sup>50</sup> required for selling food and thus amateur restaurateurs were able to compete by offering simple and affordable everyday dishes. The dai pai dong was the most accessible social gathering space. The casualness and at times unrefined nature of the dai pai dong was accepted because it was treated like an extension of the home. When the first televisions started appearing in Hong Kong, the dai pai dong were the first to receive them, becoming essentially collective living rooms.

As a collective space in the city, the dai pai dong reinforced a set of values outside the heteronomy of capitalism. By offering the license holders the choice to turn virtually any site into a food stall, it also secured them a place in the *common* of the city. As such the dai pai dong could never be a means of pursuing endless profits, but as a means of welfare, of *limited autonomy* it created the *space* for a collective set of values based on neighbourliness or "friendliness".<sup>51</sup>

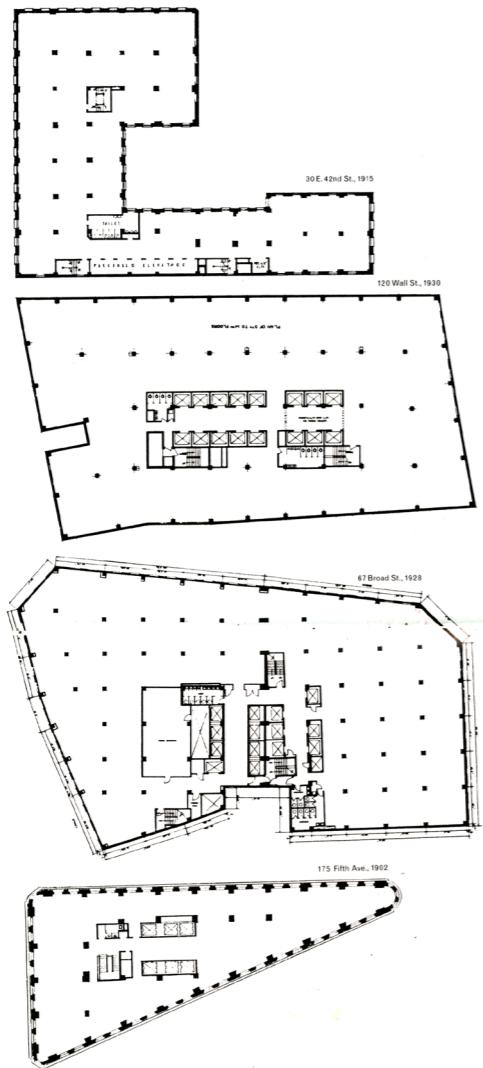


Figure 26.  
Rem Koolhaas, OMA, Typical Plans  
“Typical Plan is neutral, not anonymous”

## POTENTIAL

52. Koolhaas, R., & Mau, B. (1998). *SMLXL*. 335.

53. Le Corbusier (1986). *Towards a New Architecture*.

In recent years, the space of the city appears to have been subsumed by developer values. Decisions of quality, aesthetics or “design” have become criteria in relation to property values, rendering buildings as instruments with which to maximize profits. In “Typical Plan” Rem Koolhaas describes the modern free plan as “zero-degree architecture, architecture stripped of all traces of uniqueness and specificity.”<sup>52</sup> Its generic nature the ideal vessel for business, reducing buildings into uniformly rentable square meters, commodities. The perceived inequality in the city stems not from a lack of transparency or accountability in decision making, but by the continuous cycle of profit that has rendered the city unable to reflect the diversity of society.

Yet this generic *emptiness* was specifically the quality lauded by Le Corbusier at the advent of the free plan.<sup>53</sup> The emptiness offered by the absence of supporting walls became a model for unrestrained internal usage, limitless potential for the autonomy of the factory worker. What this thesis proposes is to invest in architecture not only as formal experimentation, but to task architecture with framing and limiting this potential. If emptiness is simultaneously potential and commodity, then the possibility of architecture to preserve and define this potential becomes more important than ever.

Despite the understandable appeal of the bottom-up

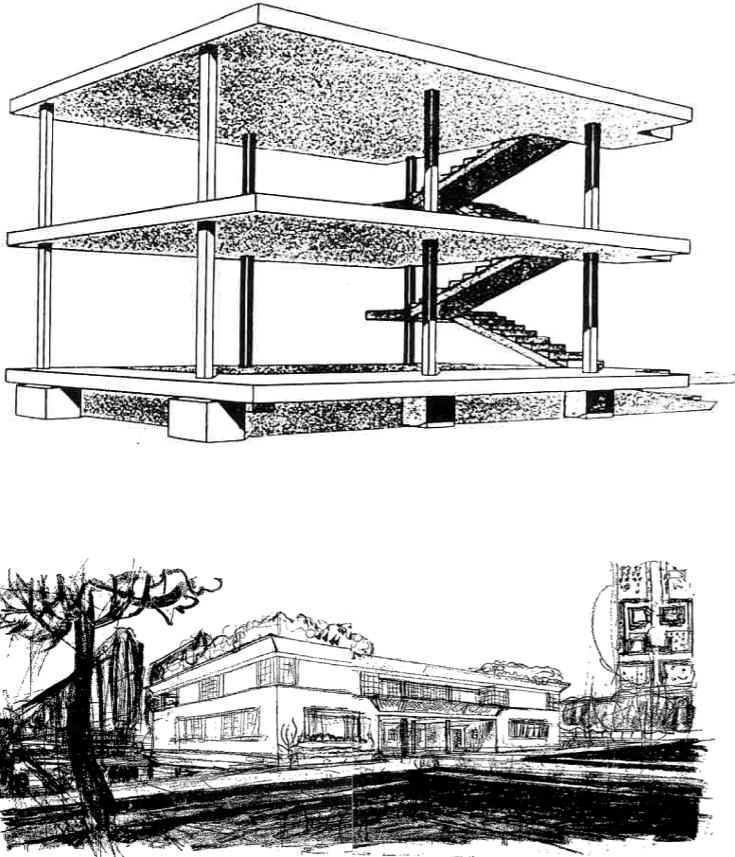


Figure 27.

Le Corbusier, Maison Dom-ino

Perhaps it is telling that the image of the structural frame of the dom-ino house has been given so much attention. While the accompanying image of what could be constructed with the Dom-ino system, a decidedly un-modern house, has been given less attention.

54. also “discussions”,  
“workshops”, “creativity”,  
“exhibitions”, “art”, “activating”,  
“involvement”, “openness”,  
“engagement”, “placemaking”,  
“inclusive”, “urban tactics”,  
“open”, “DIY”, “guerilla”,  
“transparency”, “spatial practice”

55. Freedman, J. (n.d.). The  
Tyranny of Structurelessness

or the informal, the friendliness with which it is approached in the discourse of architecture and urbanism as a solution to the imbalances of the city, has caused it to pass with little scrutiny. The surprisingly ambiguous rhetoric<sup>54</sup> of “participation” or “activating public space” risks losing what makes the bottom-up so compelling in the first place. As an expression of autonomy, the bottom up is a highly visible opportunity for people to engage with the city free from the apparent hegemony of top-down planning structures. Yet to co-exist in a structureless group is a flawed task. For “as long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules.”<sup>55</sup> Without addressing formal structures, these informal processes are ultimately vulnerable to being subsumed by other forces.

Architecture that engages its inhabitants not by calling for acts of participation, but with the explicit strategy to define a space for autonomy; offers a chance to legitimize these informal processes through the act of creating a limit. Within heteronomous society, architecture can propose its own set of values, to define a space that people can choose to engage with on their own terms. A chance to return to a moment of collective values, a moment where the heteronomy of capitalism was suspended.

Be friends  
Architecture or Revolution

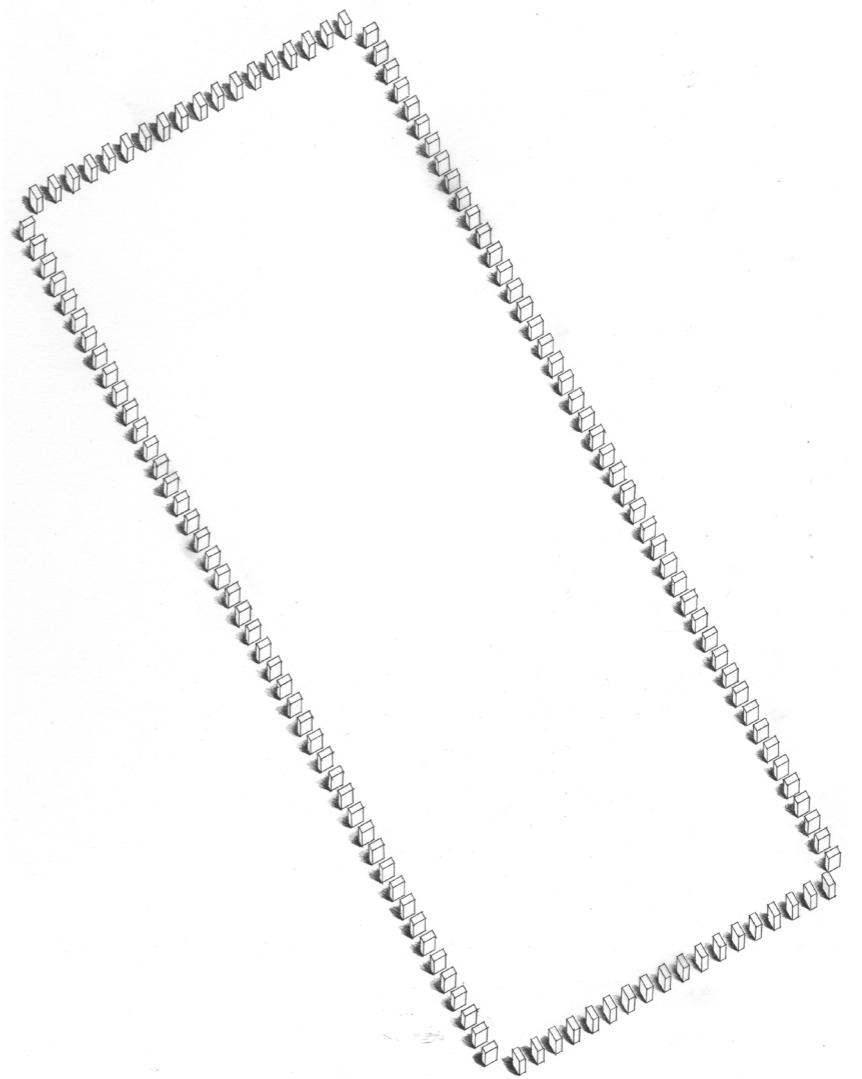


Figure 28.  
Festival City  
Perimeter

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