

## Case Study

## Urban in-betweenness: Rotterdam / Mexico City

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The city is a place of clashing forces, a field of reactions through all scales. The objectification of these conflicts represented by catastrophic events in an out-of-proportion block of overwhelming numerical facts, creates distance between the scale of the event and the way it is perceived by those who are not suffering from it directly. It seems impossible to take into account each person involved in a conflict, but in fact this is what is reflected in the city: an atomisation of individuals going through a traumatic experience, each of them working as a seed of change that eventually will have spatial repercussions. Global conflicts – natural disasters, exoduses of refugees, chemical spills – are made concrete in the city and are synthesised in experiences that respond and adapt to personal habits.

In that sense, conflict can be seen as the origin of urban resistance; an opportunity for citizens to reconsider, renew and reorder physical configurations and social patterns. It happens 'here and now', and in this immediacy there is no room for hesitation: either you act or lose your chance to turn catastrophe into opportunity. This defines the city as a temporary construction, which is made and unmade, every day, again and again, rebuilding it from the social realm. Hence, the city, for its dwellers, is a sequence of spatial accidents that hosts their activities and everyday dramas. It is not intellectualised, it is suffered. And it all starts at a micro scale.

Designers, like urbanites, increasingly face places of complex distant relations, new spatialities, and multiple subjectivities. We, as design researchers immersed in the urban context, explore the bridges between the static imagery and the effervescent action—between the built environment and society. As the space is practiced, as the city is lived, there are elements that help us to understand the value of what has been taking place in space and time; tangible and intangible components that change scale. In that sense, the city has to acquire a real and raw dimension that goes beyond paper and words. At street level, the borderlines of these elements are blurred by the overlapping layers of the urban realm; each of these elements hides behind its apparent meaning and function a whole different set of possible interpretations both in sense and in modes of use. This is what space, subject to conflict, manifests. This is where the door to *Nepantla* opens.<sup>1</sup>

In Rotterdam, for example, the highway intersection of *Kleinpolderplein* used to be a symbol of progress after World War II. [Fig. 1] But it also emphasizes how modern urban planning dissected the city, creating a withered space and social boundaries between neighbourhoods. Now that the four-story intersection has reached its expiration date, and cars are banned out of the city center as an aftereffect of global warming, several artistic interventions catalyse transition into a more



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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Fig. 1: Intersection Kleinpolderplein, Rotterdam. Aerial picture of the roundabout.

Fig. 2: Street level view on the Kleinpolderplein, including one of the flyovers, the pond and the artwork "Die bocht" by artist collective Observatorium (2011).





Fig. 3



Fig. 4

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Fig. 3: Aerial view on Mexico City.

Fig. 4: Appropriation of public space in Pueblo de la Magdalena Mixihuca, Mexico City.

humanised space: a pond harvesting rainwater marks the initial construction of a park, along with plinths giving space to abandoned public art works from all over the city. [Fig. 2] Here, traffic lights, narrow sidewalks and the imposition of a vehicular highline were elements trapped in a passively accepted semantic field showing the supremacy of the car. After the conflict – after the state of uncertainty – other possibilities of practice were detected.

In a different context, in the conflict-ridden neighborhood Pueblo de la Magdalena Mixiuhca in Mexico City, certain physical traces represent the sense of belonging and appropriation of space. [Fig. 3] As a result of hyper-urbanisation caused by social inequality, increasing violence and water scarcity, the village transformed from a rural area that provided fruit and vegetables for most of the city to a notorious place for the cultivation of opium poppy and the distribution of drugs in the centre of the megalopolis. Nowadays, while walking through the neighborhood one can notice numerous trees planted spontaneously by inhabitants and plenty of flowerpots on the balconies. [Fig. 4] This guerrilla gardening is a way to hold on to the former socio-cultural narrative of the village while transition is slowly setting in.

The very solid built environment and the very fluid human actions blend together in a turbulent serendipity that leads to a relentless state of in-betweenness. This blurred space – a threshold loaded with ambiguity, which is exalted in times of conflict – also creates opportunities for intervention and innovation. However, we need to be capable of identifying the elements that interact before, during and after conflicts have taken place. There could be clues at a micro scale that stand out from the chaos causing actions that could eventually impact a macro scale.

Paraphrasing Italo Calvino, we have to seek and be able to recognise who and what, in the midst

of hell, are not hell, then make them endure, give them space.<sup>2</sup> The fragments of the city are recalibrated through small fragmented actions, just like the atomised individuals who give rise to them. A chasm stabilises, at least momentarily, and the state of Nepantla stops being alienating. The physical space becomes a natural extension of human action. Until the next conflict arises. Until we have to go through Nepantla again.

As design researchers we need to discover the meaning loaded onto the elements already composing the urban environment; how do they transmit information? How is this information codified, interpreted and used? And most importantly, how can these blocks be recodified into new opportunities for understanding the needs, wishes and dreams of the users that live in daily conflict.

## Notes

1. The Nahuatl word Nepantla originates from 16th century Mexico and conceptualises the state of 'in-betweenness'. It can refer to the act of resistance in which a part of something (eg. culture) that cannot synthesise into a new situation is left behind, but other parts become part of the new situation. In this case, we use the concept of Nepantla to reflect upon the mixed condition of the city, its fragmentation and the micro forces that give shape to the urban environment.
2. Italo Calvino, *Las ciudades invisibles*, trans. Aurora Bernárdez (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 2010 [1972]).

**Biographies**

Moniek Driesse (The Netherlands, 1983) is a design researcher living and working in flux between Rotterdam and Mexico City. She considers art and design as powerful tools to catalyse dialogue on political, social and cultural issues. From her interest in working at the boundaries of disciplines, she collaborates in diverse projects, increasingly focused on artistic practice and architecture in contexts of conflict and the development of tools for dialogue and activism. Within those (self-initiated) projects she utilises design, curating, publishing and education, to create a cohesive practice that connects arts, politics, (social) science and daily reality.

Isaac Landeros (Mexico, 1983) is an architect and landscape designer living and working in Beijing since 2012. His interest in design, architecture and public spaces has taken him to major global capitals in order to obtain a firsthand understanding of the diverse layers involved in the most iconic urban environments. These experiences have become an engine that propels his design ideas. He pursues a path based on transdisciplinary collaboration that goes from mapping the city to graphic and furniture design; he is immersed in a world that mixes local culture, art and trends from the four corners of the world.

