

Affection as a Subversive Architectural Form

**Elvira Dyangani Ose
and Raúl Muñoz de la Vega
in conversation**

Elvira Dyangani Ose: There is something more profuse in the trajectory of *Recetas Urbanas* (Urban Prescriptions) than their projects: the people who intervene in them. Strangers and acquaintances. People from the neighbourhood and beyond. Faces, voices, people. The conversations, the laughter, an occasional shout... all of the above have perhaps as much or even more presence than the noise of drills and hammers. Impromptu questions, stopping all tasks to share an opinion or to take a decision, as well as explaining the aim of a job using an anecdote. And, of course: music, music, music. If there were no structure to be built, the atmosphere would be that of a crowded bar on a Sunday afternoon drinking a 'carajillo' with the concern of having a 'siesta' breathing down our necks. Fast-paced rhythm meets wandering moments in which it seems that absolutely nothing happens. There is a rare collective intimacy in it. A way of building community made into a process that is established in each project. One would think that in the exercise of such a form of architecture there is a challenging spontaneity, but everything is part of an orchestration, which is as meditated as it is wildly free.

The formulation of any urban prescription implies an act of generosity—both from the studio and each of the individuals taking part in its development—transformed into a political gesture, which establishes itself as the condition of possibility

for the generation of a social space. A space that defies what was originally imposed by the political powers that regulate public administration. A social space that vindicates our capacity to intervene, our participatory role, our responsibility in decision-making processes, our capacity as active agents of change. All this while, as Cirugeda establishes, combining an active citizenry with a quality democratic management.

To this end, Recetas Urbanas' proposal of an *anarchitecture* could be observed as the enunciation of what philosopher Henri Lefebvre defines as a *differential space*. *Differential space* is arguably the most activist aspect of his theory of the Right to the City, in which he argues for the need to combat the violent homogeneity of power through *appropriation*.¹ Recetas Urbanas' projects propose subverting the bureaucratic homogeneity that governs our cities and their users' manuals, offering citizens the possibility of taking over a politically dominated technocratic space. Their projects concern both the representation of architecture as much as its theorisation, suggesting that in the practice of everyday, in our social graces, in our desires, in our participation, architecture can express itself as activism, as the catalyst of a profound transformation of administrative, social, political, and educational policies.

Raúl Muñoz de la Vega: I believe that in that sense of participation—active at different levels, lies a key concept. Architect and theorist Henri Sanoff defines the difference between representative and participatory democracy to explain, by analogy, his proposal of architecture and collective urban design. Instead of a representative design—delegated, indirect and inactive—, he proposes a participatory one—active and of direct involvement². In this respect, Recetas Urbanas' collective processes demand a much greater involvement and commitment of the citizen, whereas other models of architecture and town planning do not. And then again, he or she had never been offered so much in return.

More often than not, the studio's processes have a catalyst effect: bringing together desires and expectations, strengthening voices of groups and communities so often weakened,

succeeding in meeting unfulfilled necessities, and rendering certain demands visible. However, that transformative power embedded in many of Recetas Urbanas' prescriptions is not only geared towards citizens, it is also intended to reach public authorities and government bodies, encouraging reflection and the reformulation of their policies and actions on various fronts. Although the studio is often forced to operate in illegal or *alegal* contexts, and seemingly against the public authorities, this does not simply ignite an anti-authoritarian positioning, but rather these strategies, which are carried out without the initial cooperation of the authorities, raise awareness all the while expecting to receive support at a later stage.

In this respect, the projects *Aula Abierta Granada*, *La Escuela Crece* and *Trincheras* exemplify the evolution on how different institutional and government bodies have reacted to the studio's projects. *Aula Abierta Granada* emerged from the desire of students from different schools at the University of Granada to have a student-run space for studio-based practices and debates. The Dean's Office had to be convinced to support the initiative and its potential did not fully materialise due to the rigidity of the institution. As a consequence many of the educational proposals generated in *Aula Abierta* could not be implemented.

With *Aula Abierta Granada* as a precedent, projects such as *La Escuela Crece* and *Trincheras* were instigated by the government bodies of, respectively, the Higher School of Design of Madrid and the Dean's Office of the Fine Arts School in Málaga. Here the institutions provided the necessary means to take on the theoretical knowledge and know-how that came out of the collective building processes.

All Recetas Urbanas' projects lacking institutional or public support at an earlier stage constitute a body of knowledge that Cirugeda denominates *jurisprudencia construida* (built-up jurisprudence). This compilation of previous procedures, this body of knowledge proves that alternative solutions are feasible and effective when facing the mistrust and stagnant bureaucratic culture that so often prevails in public administrations.

Furthermore, it is an antidote to overcome the conformism and discouragement that citizens hold.

EDO: In that sense built-up jurisprudence is an absolute, limitless form of subversion, which establishes each prescription as the condition of the possibility for a new development to emerge, determined by its capacity to adapt to a new scenario, regardless of the specificity of each particular context.

This repertory of previous case studies, this body of knowledge, as you point out, constitutes the representation of *Difference*, a countercultural human revolution bringing together collectives and individuals, managing desires while disrupting administrative policies. It is this formulation of affection as a political act, this network of affective alliances as a form of subversive architecture, that I consider the most important contribution of the studio to the architectural and artistic field but, just as important, to social politics.

Something that comes to mind is the fact that in Recetas Urbanas' architecture, projects lacking initial support from the public authorities, as well as those carried out in artistic contexts—mostly temporary initiatives, e.g. the *Institutional Prosthesis* and *House of Words*—resonate vividly with what sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone calls 'people as infrastructure'. Simone suggests that cities become more productive and effective spaces as a result of the social relationships that are established in them. According to Simone, social, political and economic practices are crucial in the making of capacity for social formation, and to prepare specific players to reach and extend themselves across a more expansive world, and enact the possibilities of urban becoming.³

In this sense, the prescriptions generate a social space, an organic and temporary community, suggesting micro-scenarios that could serve as case-studies for a potential social and administrative transformation at a larger scale. That is to say, the prescriptions do not respond exclusively to the specific context they intervene on but rather generate a typology that

allows its implementation in other contexts. *Recetas Urbanas'* projects incorporate collective experiences and memories into architecture and its design. And that is when architecture turns into questioning, turns into *tekné*, where citizens' approach to a legal and judiciary framework is formulated, triggering renewed paths for self-governance.

There is no project that better illustrates the idea of the prescription as a micro-scenario for the reformulation of the social than the *Cañada Real Social and Community Centre*—which also means the return of *Recetas Urbanas* to an area they had already intervened in 2009 with other members of the network, *Arquitecturas Colectivas*. This is, perhaps, their most complex project to date. Here the studio combines a sustainable building that brings together structures and other materials from previous projects and a proposal for a space in which members of several associations and local residents will gather—we should not forget that *Cañada Real* is a neighbourhood that integrates individuals from multiple origins and economic backgrounds. The greatest challenge resides not in the use of the resulting space, but in the community's capacity to propose, already at the construction stage, a different social space, one of caring and affection, in which these collectives will live together and engage with the various political forces involved in the conception and realization of the project.

Furthermore, *House of Words* as a hybrid between the *Institutional Prosthesis* and the *Aula Abierta*, implied a questioning of the social in the terms mentioned above. It involved more than seventy people from all over the world, who contributed to the design and construction of a place they would not use, but which would welcome others as its main aim. The studio, in collaboration with the artist Loulou Cherinet, devised a space for participation, reflection and gathering that would host the symposium of the biennial and its accompanying programme. But it also aimed to question and subvert the notion of 'outsider-ship' [in Swedish, 'utanförskap'] that the local Conservative Party coined in 2006 to define certain foreigners as intruders, determining that they were outside the *status quo*, under *alegal* conditions.

Cherinet generated an open and pluralistic dialogue in which she examined the impact of the policy and media's rhetoric in referring to such communities. However, the emphasis of the project was on the collective process that preceded it, which gave rise to what would become a space of coexistence for members of those communities and the audience of the biennial, producing a temporary—and conceptual—sense of homeliness that the Swedish public administration was incapable of granting. It offered the warmth of a stranger, a network of unexpected affection without limits or categories of belonging.

A network of affection apparent in other *Recetas Urbanas* projects, which make use of organic and informal strategies occurring in our day-to-day experience, in addition to an exhaustive investigation on the social and administrative policies that govern each particular context, without which the scope of the subversion of any form of legality would not be possible.

RMV: So which tools do citizens have to affect or subvert a certain legality? Who is allowed to participate in processes of law-making? From which perspectives is the law being conceived? During my years at Law School it was difficult to find somebody willing to answer these questions. Today, with this still in mind, I wonder if this is why it was easy to observe something familiar in the queries behind several of Cirugeda's prescriptions. Some projects, such as *Kuvas SC* or *Andamio*, are attempts to understand and test how citizens interact with government entities, how permeable the law is to being questioned by the citizenry and transformed to generate situations that even though they are a social need are neglected by the authorities.

In this sense, most of the urban prescriptions comprise a proposal for a legal amendment. The subversive power behind them goes beyond the mere questioning of a *status quo*, as the manner in which the studio uses architecture enables new social situations that allow them to re-evaluate legality both from a theoretical perspective and through a practical approach. Unlike other ways of critical analysis, they do not just identify a problem but also provide a possible solution, which is already

materialized. Thus, public authorities are forced to react against a consummate reality and not just a theoretical proposition.

EDO: That power to subvert reality is also a crucial aspect in the studio's work as it not only encourages the development of new legislation and mechanisms that have an impact on tenders and open calls, but also works as a formula to question architecture itself and its training. Projects such as *La Escuela Crece* meant questioning and subsequently changing the educational curriculum and increased the capacity of teachers and students to intervene in the decision-making processes of their educational centres, expanding the given limits and forcing them to be porous to the potential of their imagination.

RMV: Perhaps without being fully aware, during his college years Cirugeda was testing out the educational methodology that he would later develop in projects such as *La Escuela Crece*—an alternative and horizontal education that encourages the collective production of knowledge and is based on practical research.

The apathy he acquired towards the official education at his architecture school in Seville —where he never completed his studies—was mostly due to the verticality with which architecture was taught and *thought*, from teacher to student and architect to citizenry, the rigidity and academic bureaucracy in this institution, the lack of encouragement for academic critique and the disconnection between college and real life and how cities actually work. At the end of the day, architecture, just as happens in Law and Medicine, situated out of the realm of social sciences, have traditionally lacked the necessary space for critical thinking in academia.

EDO: His strong and constant appeal for transdisciplinary work seems evident, or perhaps even his need to escape any kind of definition or label trying to categorize the studio or Cirugeda himself. When he was producing works of art before he became an architect, he did not want to be considered an artist. His exhibitions were no such thing: they were gatherings,

happenings, something that took place every time someone came into the space he had chosen to be his temporary studio. That was the case, for instance, with his intervention at the Finnish Pavilion in Seville. It also happened without exception when anyone visited him in *La Casita* in the years that Cirugeda occupied it with different collectives. It is impossible to deny the artistic licence he holds in his approach to architecture, far from the rigidity he experienced in his college years.

His individual projects transformed some mad ideas into a reality by the relentless questioning of his immediate context: turning a kitchen table into a work of art, expanding Pepe's apartment, and creating the outline of a household that would be dispersed in the empty rooms of his neighbours' flats. Cirugeda's and Recetas Urbanas' architecture is first and foremost an architecture of complicity—one that in addition to his relatives and neighbours, nowadays involves all kinds of volunteers: social workers, artists, architects, teachers, cultural agents, lawyers, community leaders, disenchanting citizens, members of unrepresented communities, who all together constitute what Cirugeda calls 'the loonies' army', an *army* that generates a map of affections as the ultimate form of subversion.

NOTES:

1. Henri Lefebvre suggests the Right to the City as a claim that 'manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city.' Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of the Space* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), p. 231.

2. Henry Sanoff, *Integrating Programming, Evaluation and Participation in Design. A Theory Z Approach* (New York: Routledge Revivals, 1992).

3. AbdouMaliq Simone, 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg', in *Public Culture* 16(3), (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 407–429.