As part of her AIR project A Public Practice, Jeanne van Heeswijk invited students from the Academy of Architecture to participate in her 2Up 2Down project in Anfield, Liverpool. Karin Christof sheds light on this and comparable projects with which the academy is involved.

Bottom-up – top-down: the neighbourhood as a tool for urban design

By Karin Christof

What is the role of the architect and urban designer in our society? Should urban design be more oriented towards developing people as citizens instead of producing and developing goods and commodities? If so, is it the task of an architect and urban designer to plan the urban environment with the local community and to incorporate their wishes and ideas?

Artist and cultural producer Jeanne van Heeswijk, AIR at the Academy of Architecture in 2011, is an inspiration for alternative approaches in urban design practices today. The Academy decided to focus this winter semester on research and design around the theme of the 'smart city', with an emphasis on alternative forms of town planning. The participants examined a wide range of issues: what does a city need in order to function more effectively in terms of intelligent communication, efficient transport and applied technologies such as for water supply, renewable resources, waste and electricity? Through the collection of different perspectives on building a Smart City, Rogier van den Berg, head of Urbanism at the Academy of Architecture, believes

that comparing Europe with other global regions sheds light on how urbanism is practiced: in European cities dealing with the economic crisis, large-scale projects are disappearing from the landscape and small-scale urbanism based on bottom-up initiatives is on the rise; meanwhile, countries such as Brazil and India, whose economies are thriving, are preserving small-scale change through the use of the existing local social fabric as an appropriate approach for alleviating poor urban living conditions.

Taking notion of the Smart City as their framework, Academy of Architecture students carried out research on location in Anfield (UK), Sao Paolo (Brazil) and Danyigba (Ghana). The students worked with a range of professionals and citizens in interdisciplinary teams spanning various faculties, disciplines and cultures. They explored how these cities intervene in an appropriate and sustainable way to improve living conditions in the diverse situations they encountered.

On the following pages we present a summary of their experiences and research.

Anfield

As the last part of her residency, the artist and urban curator Jeanne van Heeswijk invited Academy students to participate in a workshop on her long-term project in Anfield, a residential borough of Liverpool where development has ceased and there are many empty buildings. However, empty urban areas have plenty of potential if local people take charge – they can reinvest meaning into public space and the community, reactivate interpersonal connections and reinforce a sense of stewardship in a natural way.

Van Heeswijk took the non-governmental artistic project *2Up 2Down* as on opportunity to create a real-time playground where people could learn how to build a house – for themselves and for the community. *2Up 2Down* is part of the Liverpool Biennial 2012, and it offers young people from the Anfield area the chance to engage with architecture and to develop spaces for the community. Architects, social workers, a group of builders, artists, members of the local community, volunteers and municipality workers are all contributing to making it happen. The project encourages young people to think about their future and their neighbourhood. By building the house they will not only have made a great creative achievement: they will also be changing the future for their entire neighbourhood. Over a period of two years and with the collaboration of the interdisciplinary professional team, local people will be trained up in all the necessary skills (carpentry, masonry, interior design, etc) to develop, design and complete an affordable and sustainable building.

Meritxell Blanco Diaz is a student at the Academy of Architecture in Amsterdam. She assisted at the project for a week and half during the workshop in August 2011 and was impressed by the opportunities and skills being passed on to these young people. On first impressions, she found the neighbourhood depressing, because it seemed like the proposed rebuilding of the area was a hopeless enterprise. But watching the children working on their self-designed houses with such enthusiasm, humour and energy, she saw there was real reason for believing in the possibility of change. Children are the soul of the neighbourhood, Diaz believes: they have very little materially, but no one can take away their dreams – and these dreams can be articulated and realised.

Sao Paolo

One of the fastest growing *favelas* (slums) in Sao Paulo is Heliopolis – 'city of the sun'. Heliopolis was the test case for a group of 40 students of architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, media studies and social sciences, who had come from New York, Sao Paulo and Amsterdam. Favelas are often romanticised as examples of the self-initiated urbanism of a self-made city. But favelas lack useful infrastructure – there are no street names and no addresses, for example. Under the guidance of the local municipality workers, students visited the location twice, talking with the favela committee leaders and finding out what it was that they liked about their environment. As third-year student Veronika Kovacsova pointed out, they decided it was better to ask the people what they were proud of than what they lacked, because to do otherwise might have pushed them into pointing out negative aspects of their local area. For Veronika, architecture is as much about people as it is about the construction itself: 'It's about thinking together and thinking differently.' In areas like the favelas, architecture can be made by anyone who has a good idea. As the workshop leader and urban designer Donald van Dansik pointed out, 'Any kid can build if there's Lego; every adult can build if there's an opportunity.'

The project aimed at upgrading Heliopolis favela is of interest to the municipality because it is looking to improve infrastructure and living conditions and to create a sustainable and healthy city. In recent years, the common practice has been to tear down sections of the favela and replace them with housing blocks – a form of social housing. However, costs have been an issue and many people were not keen on living in these new but dull buildings.They also lacked any 'in-between' public space for collective amenities – those spaces that are the lubricant for community interaction.

The students approached the urban issues of the favelas from their own very different angles, but they were all very much impressed by the existing urban and social structure, which is rooted in close family bonds and overlapping domestic activities. The students were unanimous in wanting to preserve and strengthen this multi-generational social structure, so they proposed adding 'cores' by taking away some of the buildings from the dense housing structure and building a steel frame structure over the existing constructions. These cores would then serve as communal public spaces and provide ventilation and fire security, while still leaving areas that could be adapted by local residents.

The project's head of urban design Rogier van den Berg organised an additional collaboration: a laboratory was set up on behalf of the educational institutions involved[1] and the local government, for the further development of Heliopolis. Financed by public companies, it is made up of researchers, locals and communications experts who will work on the project for the coming two years. This will maintain the level of discussion and allow the students' plans and ideas to permeate into the further development of the neighbourhood and a better environment for informal settlements. The results of the project will be included in the *Parallel Cases II – Smart Cities* exhibition, part of the main programme of Making City, the 5th International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, starting in April 2012.

1. Smart Cities: Sao Paulo, New York and Amsterdam is an interdisciplinary and joint design project of the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, Sao Paulo; the Parsons New School for Design, New York; and the Academy of Architecture, Amsterdam.
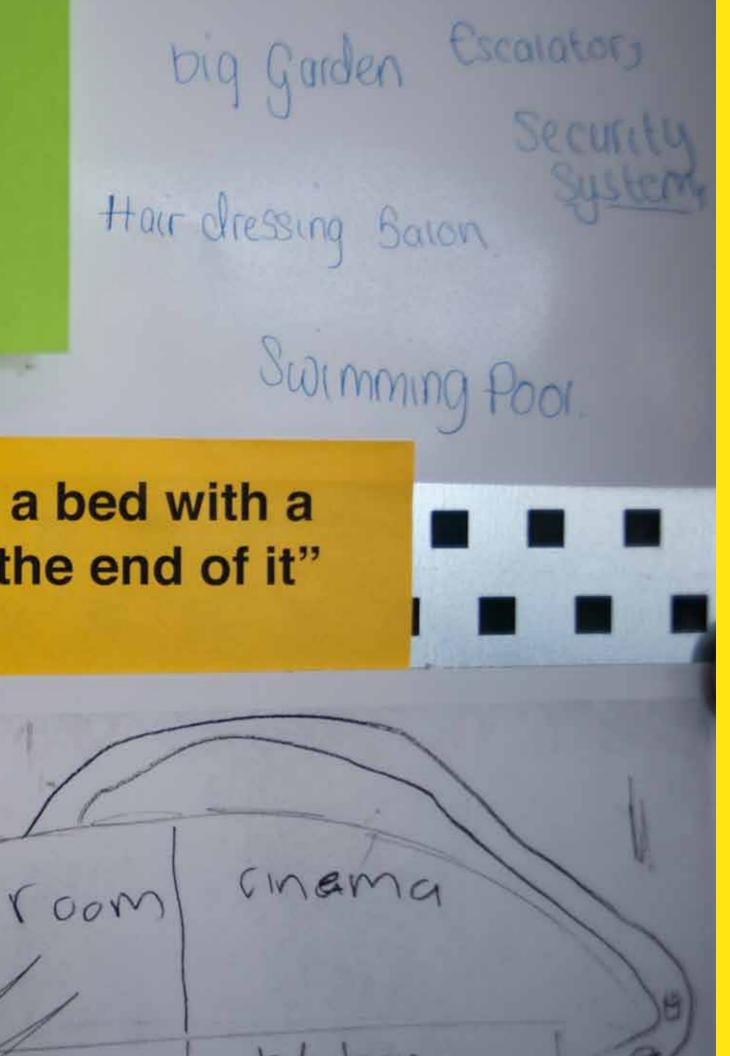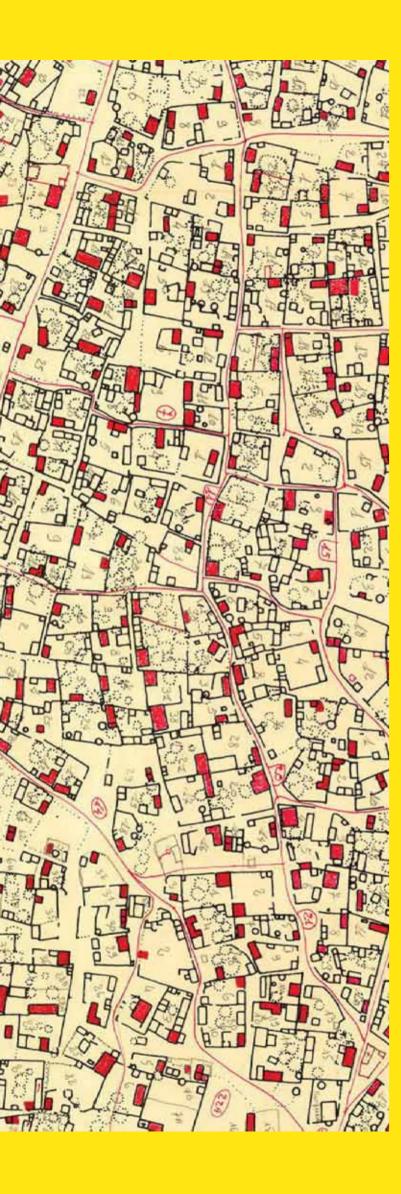for more information see Facebook page smartcities.newyorksaopaoloamsterdam

For the last phase of her residency, AIR Jeanne van Heeswijk invited students of the Academy of Architecture to participate in her two year community project *2Up 2Down* in the working-class neighbourhood of Anfield in Liverpool. The project offers an imaginative, experimental approach to dealing with empty properties and spaces in Liverpool and beyond – and it integrates the ideas and visions of local people in the development of their neighbourhood. *2Up 2Down* is being made in collaboration with Liverpool Biennial 2012 and Sheffield University.

From Ghana to Almere

Students involved in the Ghanascapes[2] project examined informal settlements and building techniques in Danyigba in the Volta Region of West Africa. Their aim was to study and map 'qualities of the informal', slowly evolving structures based on traditional local architecture. As well as analysing the local people's approach to place-making and participating in a practical workshop on local building techniques, the students developed models for new settlements in the Netherlands. They hope that these models will serve as tools for future spatial planning and housing; the informal adaptations and the internal systems of self-organisation the students encountered in Ghana exerted a particularly big influence on the designs they made once back in the Netherlands.[3]

In Ghana, public space does not display any of the characteristics of property: fences only exist to protect gardens from animals, and the spaces between the houses are at everyone's disposal. Everyone takes care of their own house and the public space surrounding it. As third-year student Narda Beunders pointed out, people there live *with* one another, as a community, rather than *next to* one another. For Beunders, the most important aspect of this community was the sense of personal responsibility for the public domain, as demonstrated by the initiatives they took and the sense of stewardship they had for a given plot or area of land. Here, the in-between space thus serves as a motor for a healthy and vibrant community: local residents are proud to be in charge of the land around their home: it is land that they share with their neighbours and that is available for the whole community to use.

Back in the Netherlands, the students were able to test out their findings in the new town of Almere. How would the schemes they analysed in Ghana fit into this new environment and in what ways would they be re-interpreted? Would the regulated inflexibility of the Dutch context limit the potential for spontaneity in the urban domain? Where to start? Currently, residents are required to submit a request for planting a tree, having a sheep in the backyard or building a shed, no matter how small it might be. This means that there is little scope for people doing anything without having to asking permission. So the students proposed asking the municipality to provide more freedom for citizens to initiate projects, make decisions and do things for themselves.

2. The Ghanascapes project is a collaboration between the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture and Ho Polytechnic, Ghana.

3. The results of the workshop were shown at the exhibition Ghana; An Organic Experience: Joe Osae Addo An Inno-Native Architect, 16 December to 10 March 2012 at the Casla centre for architecture in Almere, the Netherlands.

The architect, the urban designer, the citizen and the public space

Our public space is communal; it belongs to everyone. There is, then, a need to exert influence on this space and maintain it. As well as the citizen as initiator, producer or participant who wants to actively shape the surroundings, the architect and urban designer can also intervene within existing structures and play a key role in the alliances between the stakeholders in urban design projects. But what is the best approach taking an issue put forward by residents, policy makers or private parties and translating it into an urban strategy or design? How can one most effectively use the input from local people on developments in architecture and urban design, so that they can co-shape the future urban environment?

The participants in all these projects have a range of views on these issues. Veronika Kovacsova was most impressed by the strong opinions and visions of the young people of the favela in Heliopolis. Although they were accustomed to their living conditions and were shaped by them, they were at the same time amazingly responsive and engaged when it came to new designs and functions. She believes we should try to perceive the world through the eyes of this new generation. How might the input of these young people impact on the development of a future district?

Meritxell Blanco Diaz, who worked on the Anfield project, took on the role of architect-teacher as she advised and guided the group towards achieving their dreams of building their homes. Blanco Diaz was fascinated by how people are able to plan their own home within a pre-set structure. This kind of activity could become reality, a sort of 'free space' that could help to form every responsible citizen. The project also questions existing power systems by breaking open existing structures for the benefit of the end user; as Jeanne van Heeswijk put it, 'We take our surroundings for granted, but we shouldn't: everything in it has been thought of and decided about by somebody.'[4]

As to the question of who should be responsible for the public space, one could argue that cities should be for the people, organised by the people and made with the people – preferably current or potential long-term residents. A framework, or storyboard, could be created to indicate what citizens are and are not allowed to do within their own community. This structure would imply that they can actually do anything they want, because the ground is open for everybody to use. Your own backyard is the starting point: small plots could become a large public garden maintained by the citizens – the people. Is this realistic? Or is just idealistic, wishful thinking?

What are your rights and what are your duties as a city dweller and community member? Renowned activist urban planner Jane Jacobs believed that, in the end, people will do what is best for a city through their individual actions. And in 1915 the Scottish biologist and writer Patrick Geddes wrote that, 'All planning should take account of three core issues: folk, work and place.'[5]

Thanks to the interviewees Veronika Kovacsova (Sao Paulo), Narda Beunders (Ghana/Almere), Meritxell Blanco Diaz (Anfield), the students at Amsterdam's Academy of Architecture, and Rogier van den Berg, head of Urban Design at the Academy of Architecture.

Karin Christof is a freelance researcher, curator and writer, developing art and architectural projects.

4. BNG conference report, 5 November 2005.

5. Patrick Geddes, Cities in Evolution, 1915.