Conclusion: Collaborative design as a political tool

This book aimed to address collaborative tools and methods for urban planning and design from the potential of incorporating silenced and marginalised voices into the centre of city-making and development. Collaborative design is assumed to be a political tool that goes beyond the limitations of participatory processes by actively challenging power structures and enabling more inclusive, transformative forms of agency. Unlike conventional participation, which often limits stakeholders to predefined roles within established frameworks, collaborative design encourages co-authorship, fostering the emergence of shared narratives, knowledge, values and solutions. This approach moves beyond token involvement, positioning design as an active space for dialogue, dissent and transformation. As such, collaborative design reshapes how we view not only the design process but also the very nature of political engagement and governance by democratising both creation and decision making.

This implies a different perspective on the role of city-building professionals and ways of perceiving and acting in reality. Therefore, collaborative design also involves a critical revision of our own tools and methods, both as researchers and as practitioners.

We believe that starting this reflection from the peripheries in the world enable us to highlight the contradictions between the external and static visions of the idealised world and the dynamism and complexity of the concrete real world (Yiftachel 2009). When faced with a dynamic reality, such as that of the favelas, we realise that professionals are unable to effectively grasp nuances of self-built spaces. We find ourselves adapting instruments designed for other realities, times and contexts. At most, we manage to produce a series of approximations.

Further developing tools to approximate, exchange, collaborate and co-produce spaces in cities is a key issue in the pathway to more inclusive,

egalitarian and radically transformed cities. In times of a multitude of crises, such as the climate, wars and recessions, we as professionals must rethink our role and our tools and understand planning and design as processes instead of products.

Other tools, other uses and other times

As architects and urban planners, we have learned that if we want to participate in collective construction as an alternative way of relating to spaces, we must rethink our tools, processes and roles. In this discussion, it is worth emphasising the importance of the debate about the architect's authorship. Historically, architecture has been linked to art and, thus, to the concepts of monuments and creation. In a reality where spaces are often modified by the residents themselves to suit their expanded needs, a conflict is created and it invites us to reflect on the role of the architect and urbanist in cities.

The vision of this creator-architect distances the professional that develops projects from the practice of cities or from their in-depth knowledge of the social reality in which they intend to intervene. Harvey (2000) emphasises the role of the architect not only as a shaper and transformer of physical spaces but also as an agent who gives human, aesthetic and symbolic meanings to space. However, Harvey (2000) also notes that this image of the architect can be rebutted by the metaphor of the architect that exists in all of us, that is, the understanding that each individual produces, reproduces, transforms and gives meaning to spaces.

During our work, we were constantly faced with limits and challenges as practitioners and scholars aiming to work closer to reality. These limits go beyond our lack of practice in collaborative processes or activist architecture; they are closely related to the relationship between the production of space and the reproduction of the naturalised logics of domination in our system.

This reproduction is directly reflected in our tools, times and processes. As (Ferro 1982) argues, our tools, especially our design tools, serve as instruments of alienation, by separating those who conceptualize the city from those who build it:

> The designer's drawing comes between the hand that makes and its goal. In fact, this is the first mission of design under capitalism: to separate the hand from its own objective, the doing from the done. The separation of the labor

> force from the product of its work, the spring of exploitation, has repercussions, engenders its echo, in the material progress of production. The distancing of the worker from the means of production is prolonged in the distancing of the productive moment, its specific logic, and its result. (Ferro, 2002: s/p)

In marginalised spaces, especially in the so-called Global South, design is often an element of oppression and of dialogue. Planning and design can and are often used as justifications for large-scale evictions. In the name of progress and development, spaces are designed top-down and local people are replaced, as if they were objects. Their lives, networks, spatial knowledge and practices are disregarded.

Escobar (2018) illustrates other forms of interacting with space and nature when talking about how Indigenous communities have extensively built 'life projects' instead of 'development projects'. Indigenous communities advocate for life projects as a form of resistance and to sustain their relational ontologies. Escobar (2018: 65) explores the idea of autonomous design but critically reflects on whether the design as we know it is intrinsically related to capitalism:

> Is design tied, inextricably, to capitalism and a liberal conception of politics? Conversely, can design be infused with a more explicit sense of politics, even radical politics?[1]

Escobar (2018) advocates for a shift in our understanding of the design as a product or a technology towards one that is interactive, centred on the user, collaboratively produced and based on experiences and the production and reproduction of life. This requires a different system of values, ways of relating to each other, ethical principles, tools and methods. Escobar (2018: 183) describes this as the transition to relational design instead of dualistic design:

> These proposals sense a great transformation of design. Design itself becomes a project in transition and joins other theoretical-political projects that seek to enrich our understanding of life and the human … New practices of co-design, participatory design and design activism (to which I will add autonomous design in the next chapter) become the raw material of a

1 Free translation from Deepl from Spanish to English.

> new model of design for social innovation. Whichever mode of design prevails, the implication is that design knowledge needs to be rethought if it is to support collaborative design with non-experts. New design knowledge will be based, above all else, on a positioning that is, simultaneously, critical of the status quo and constructive because it contributes, actively, to broad cultural change.[2]

Beyond new tools, methods and interpretations of design, we must critically reflect on our notion of time. By entering the field and establishing collaborations with local actors and communities, it becomes clear that the timescales of our work and those of universities and public authorities are not in line with the urgent needs of residents, who in many cases transform their space on a daily basis.

The linear view of time present in the practice of urban planning is not only inconsistent with the dynamic reality of the studied spaces but also serves as an instrument of imposition and domination. The linearity of time implies the idea of evolution and progress. In theory, pre-moderns (Latour 1993), are at an earlier stage of development than the moderns or the developed countries of the Global North. As time passed and the populations evolved, according to the logic of these dominant models, they would one day reach this new level. In other words, the attempt to impose a predefined physical model and the understanding of a temporal structure of evolution is reflected in the work of practitioners in the fields of architecture and urbanism to reinforce existing segregation and impose one certain way of life on city inhabitants.

In a counterpoint to the colonial view of time, Santos (1981) proposes time as a spiral, in which past, present and future can coexist at certain moments. According to Latour (1993), what defines us is the exchange, accumulation and coexistence of different times in each and every existing social practice. More than revealing the past and imagining the future, what matters to us are the elements that each individual or social group selects from these different times:

> We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled. Elements that appear remote if we follow the spiral may turn out to be quite nearby if we compare loops. Conversely, elements that are quite contemporary, if we judge by the line, become quite remote if we traverse a spoke. Such

2 Free translation from Deepl from Spanish to English.

> a temporality does not oblige us to use the labels 'archaic' or 'advanced', since every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together elements from all times. In such a framework, our actions are recognized at last as polytemporal. (Latour 1993: 75)

In *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe (2017) proposes a reconfiguration of time as a form of resistance to the historical control imposed by colonialism. Time should not be conceived as linear and uniform, as suggested by colonial structures, but as a space where the voices and rhythms of various cultures can intertwine. In the context of collaborative design, this implies a practice that does not submit to the rhythm imposed by Western narratives of progress but recognises the multiplicity of times and lived experiences of marginalised peoples, creating spaces for active resistance against cultural homogenisation.

Escobar (2018) argues that instead of imposing universal development models, design should align with local ecological and social rhythms, acknowledging alternative ways of living that contrast with the logic of exploitation and domination. Collaborative design can be a political practice that fosters the creation of plural spaces where time and space are reconstructed to embrace the diverse temporalities and cosmologies of Indigenous peoples and other marginalised cultures, thus creating a development that respects these local dynamics.

Considering all these factors, it is clear that we must rethink our tools, methods, times and role to co-produce urban spaces in horizontal exchanges. This book aimed at compiling experiences of collaborative design, planning and building that might help us to further reflect on those processes.

Empowered communities

Participation and collaboration have long been seen as crucial steps towards community empowerment, which involves equipping individuals with the tools, resources and opportunities needed to influence decisions that shape their lives. Such empowerment can manifest in various domains, including local governance, urban planning and social justice efforts. However, the concept of empowerment often implies that communities lack inherent power, suggesting that it is the role of external actors to grant them authority or amplify their voices. This perspective can inadvertently overlook the existing strengths and capacities of these communities.

This book emphasises the recognition that communities are already empowered and explores strategies for co-creating tools that encourage their active participation in shaping their environments and futures. By centring communities in the decision-making process, this approach leads to more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. It involves not only determining how actions are developed but also considering what will be created and when, with what resources and for whom.

Moreover, empowerment fosters resilience, as people who are involved in decision-making processes often take greater ownership of the results. This leads to stronger social bonds, higher engagement and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to the long-term well-being of local communities.

Collaborative design for insurgent urbanism goes beyond simply consulting the community – it involves acknowledging and engaging them as active co-creators. When communities are given the opportunity to meaningfully participate in shaping their environments, several benefits emerge.

The first benefit is related to the interaction and exchange between different types of knowledge. Communities have a deep understanding of their own spaces, cultures and challenges. Collaborative design taps into this local knowledge, allowing professionals and locals to create solutions that are relevant and sensitive to the context.

The second benefit is related to feelings of belonging and appropriation. When people are part of the design process, they are more inclined to feel a strong sense of ownership over the final outcome, which not only enhances community pride but also encourages long-term stewardship of the space. In urban projects, this often results in better maintained and more vibrant public spaces, as local residents are more invested in their care and development.

Communities that are empowered through collaborative design processes are better equipped to respond to changing circumstances. Whether it is adapting to environmental changes, shifting social dynamics or economic pressures, these communities can be resilient because they've been involved in the creation and evolution of their spaces from the beginning.

Towards insurgent design in times of multiple crises

So today we should expect to be living this turbulence for a long time to come, in a double world where two realities coexist in conflict: the old 'unlimited' world that does not recognize the limits of the planet and another that recognizes

these limits and experiments with ways to transform them into opportunities … A continent is emerging … it is a transition (long for us but short for world history) in which we must all learn to live, and live well, in the new islands of the world in doing so, anticipate what the quality of life will be like on the emerging continent. Manzini, 2015: 2–3, cited in (Escobar 2018: 172)[3]

As the world grapples with intersecting crises, ranging from climate change, migration flows and socioeconomic inequalities, the need for the fair production of space is increasingly urgent. The traditional models of urban development and spatial design, often driven by top-down decision making, are ill-equipped to deal with the complexity and diversity of contemporary crises. For instance, climate change disproportionately affects marginalised communities, and migration flows continue to reshape urban landscapes. A more inclusive, equitable and sustainable approach is required – one that views space not just as a commodity but as a shared resource co-created by those who inhabit it.

Directly involving communities in the creation and adaptation of their environments allows for solutions that are more resilient, contextually relevant and adaptive to the needs of those facing the brunt of these crises. For example, in areas vulnerable to climate change, communities with local knowledge can collaborate with architects and planners to create flood-resilient infrastructure or climate-adaptive housing that reflects their lived realities. Similarly, in cities experiencing high levels of migration, co-production with diverse communities ensures that public spaces and housing cater to the needs of all residents, fostering inclusivity rather than exclusion.

The fair production of space demands that everyone – especially those most vulnerable – has a voice in shaping their environment. As crises such as climate change and migration deepen existing inequalities, placing decision-making power in the hands of the community allows for more just and humane solutions. It also challenges long-standing hierarchies in architecture and planning in which the architect is seen as the sole creator and the community as passive recipients.

In this book, we explored collaborative design and building practices through a political lens. By examining these practices within historically marginalised communities, we proposed different methods of engaging, interacting and co-creating spaces with these groups. This approach aims to advance an equitable and sustainable urbanism. By framing these efforts as

3 Free translation from Deepl from Spanish to English.

a form of insurgent urbanism, this book underscores the inherent challenges and struggles involved in any collaborative process.

To address the deeply entrenched challenges of climate change, demographic pressures, global unsustainability and geopolitical instability, we need far more than reactive adaptations or the benefits for the wealthy. This structural crisis necessitates not merely a shift in how we occupy spaces but a profound transformation in the ways we envision and co-create our habitats. In this context, insurgent and collaborative design practices emerge as crucial alternatives to dominant urban strategies that perpetuate inequality. By engaging marginalised communities directly in the design process, these practices reject top-down models and instead foster co-production, allowing for more inclusive, just and sustainable urban environments. This approach challenges the logic of current adaptation strategies, which, as Escobar (2018) warns, are often 'defuturing' and deprive future generations of viable conditions for existence. Through insurgent urbanism, we seek to rethink and reshape our built environments in ways that not only respond to current crises but also actively construct resilient futures grounded in collaboration and equity.

Figure 33: COLLOC Workshop, Rio de Janeiro, 2024. Source: colloc archive

Figure 34: Workshop with Yarmouk University, Jordan, 2022. Source: Juliana Canedo

Figure 35: Winter School Building Resilient Cities, Cairo, 2024. Source: Juliana Canedo

Figure 36: Summer School with refugees in Märkisches Viertel, Berlin, 2022. Source: Juliana Canedo

Figure 37: COLLOC Workshop, Rio de Janeiro, 2022. Source: colloc archive

Figure 38: Winter School Building Resilient Cities, Cairo, 2024. Source: Juliana Canedo