

## Performing Architectures: 'haciendo teorías' [making room] for *situated* narratives of design

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### Abstract

**Performing Architectures makes room for new *teorías* and draws attention to the insight and knowledge of those that have been unnoticed/overlooked. The most significant contribution of this paper is its focus on situated narratives of design as it places the sightlines of the others to the forefront, it circulates gendered discourses, and displays inclusive pedagogies. In order to make room for new sets of knowledge, the essay attributes significance to Donna Haraway's situated knowledge, which underscore local embodiment. Moreover, Gloria Anzaldúa's 'haciendo teorías' as it discusses the need to 'de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy'. Lastly, Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl concept of space as a site for further understanding of subgroups where it is vital that we occupy the theorizing space with new approaches and methodologies.**

### Introduction

Donna Haraway discusses *situated knowledges* as a meaning for feminist objectivity, "*limited location*"<sup>1</sup> and immediacy. She writes, "*It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.*"<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, because situated knowledges is knowledge positioned in a specific social context, it allows *partial* points of view rather than a view from above, "*from nowhere*"<sup>3</sup> making certain experiences valuable to the generation process. Haraway offers the metaphor of vision to discuss *situated knowledges*, as to underscore *local* embodiment, *partial* perspectives and *positioning*. For

Haraway *ways* of seeing offers the opportunity to make "*responsible knowledge claims.*"<sup>4</sup> Because the views are partial, then these perspectives allow us to make connections among different valuable types of knowledge from those that comes from normative techniques to the felt knowledge that comes from survivability and resist simplification. Similarly, Nestor García Canclini writes, "*we need nomad social sciences capable of circulating through the staircase that connect those floors (of different types of knowledge).*"<sup>5</sup> A line of thought that presents an interesting walk of proposals and subjects' across an intellectual debate from particular perspectives. The resolution is not effective; however, the conversations transform the critical process.

Conversations like exchanges are constructed from different points of view. To Collectively re-imagining a place means to rethink together through *partial* perspectives and *positioning* to achieve a community consensus on the ideation, design and meaning of an ideal space. In the words of Donna Haraway: "*we do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different-and power-differentiated-communities. We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life.*"<sup>6</sup> Meaning, bodies and *positioning* on a map, on a city, on a community are important because bodies need to take space to challenge regularity and exclusion. A key design research question ask how can *positioning* allows the teaching of design to move beyond the mere provision of concepts and allow students, volunteers and instructors opportunities to make connections among different observations (views) and



Figure 1. taller Creando Sin Encargos.

improve the overall built environment? In addition, how can *critical theories* ‘haciendo teorías’ make room for feminist responses as alternative modes of pedagogy, research and practice?

We draw from feminism’s critical discourse on architecture in particular its insights on the role of architectural theory in the explorations on all alternative modes of pedagogy, research and practice that establish new ways of understanding spatial relationships, revise existing power relations and offer possibilities for new interactions. For this paper the two workshops included are led by *taller Creando Sin Encargos* (tCSE), a women-only design collective based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. One project, located in Worcester, Massachusetts, and the other in San Juan, Puerto Rico, each negotiating space, gender perspectives, proximity, diversity, and spatial precarity. The question to what extent can feminist responses to space-constructing be ‘tactical’ is at the basis of the paper.

Architecture is typically approached analytically, opposing the star system (‘famous’ male-architects), and challenging hierarchies (against a vertical practice). Feminist responses defined architecture as an interdisciplinary field of explorations about people, places, and their interactions. Women’s performing architecture

is about their presence in a place. It is about allowing women to enter discourse. As Anzaldúa notes, “*Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept from us-entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space.*”<sup>7</sup> Feminist responses also include the transfer of knowledge between institutions, fields of study, and the public. The work of contemporary feminist practitioners interested in architecture is located at sites of encounter between different spatial disciplines. Such work highlights an interest not only in the end product, but in the process of design itself, pointing to the importance of the dialogue between theory and practice in architecture. Rethinking the role of theory, from a tool of analysis to a mode of practice. As Anzaldúa notes:

*“Theory produces effects that change people and the way they perceive the world. Thus we need teorías that will enable us to interpret what happens in the world, that will explain how and*

*why we relate to certain people in specific ways, that will reflect what goes on between inner, outer and peripheral 'I's within a person and between the personal 'I's and the collective 'we' of our ethnic communities. Necesitamos teorías that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries-new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods. We need theories that will point out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for the patterns we uncover. We need theories that examine the implications of situations and look at what's behind them. And we need to find practical application for those theories. We need to de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy.*"<sup>8</sup>

*Teorías* that are reflective rather than objectifying and that take into account their own strategies and methods; they aim to offer self-reflective modes of thought and social change. They understand the production of space as something that involves dialogue; they question the status quo; they understand making, writing and acting as tactical maneuvers but also as informed and committed action which transform the world. Responses from the *flesh* as they shape how we see the world.

### **From those who live on the sidelines: re-imagine Lincoln Street**

During the summer of 2019, *taller Creando Sin Encargos* prepared a Participatory Design Workshop (PDW) for Greenhill Neighborhood Association in Worcester, Massachusetts. For the tCSE *teorías* support practice-based experiential knowledge of doing/making things/problem solving and develop fields of work in ways to encourage observation, solidarity, and action. The Workshop was arranged to understand the relationship of the people (and their bodies) within the city, encourage participatory learning among the participants as well as exchanging of information with facilitators. The tCSE design three exercises for the PDW: Exercise 1 Re-Imagine Lincoln Street "from above"; Exercise 2 Re-imagine Lincoln Street "on foot"; and Exercise 3 Re-Imagine Lincoln Street "up close". Each exercise addressed a different scale and relationship to Lincoln Street. Thus, the

exercises were arranged together and completed individually to maximize participation. tCSE started from Jan Gehl's premise that "*The natural starting point for the work of designing cities for people is human mobility and the human senses because they provide the biological basis for activities, behavior and communication in city space.*"<sup>9</sup>

The Greenhill community is nuanced by people of different nationalities, ages and social classes. Particular to Greenhill is the integration of transitional housing situated within a dedicated, building-specific environments, where the residents collaborate and contribute to the thinking of common space. Transitional housing provides people with help after a crisis such as homelessness or domestic violence. Therefore, there are also different ways of using and relating to public space. For the Latino community and for teenagers, for example, the street is an important place of social exchange. Some of the problems faced by Greenhill residents, however, are lack of security and the proliferation of garbage in the streets. Critics of urban planning like Jane Jacobs assumed that a safe street is an inhabited street, that is, passers-by take care of each other by witnessing the positioning of each body in space and how they relate to each other.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, a street designed by its inhabitants has a sense of belonging that guarantees its care and maintenance. For this reason, a participatory design workshop is an important step to recover the street, making it a safe and meaningful place.

The Workshop was also based on the fact that a participatory design process is also one of *progressive education*<sup>11</sup>, as stipulated by educator Paulo Freire, and this implies an exchange of knowledge. The information collected through the exercises allows an understanding of the place at different scales and promotes the visualization of a future with the awareness of the failures and successes of the city.

The exercise *Re-Imagine Lincoln Street "from above"* generated data by indicating the location of community assets, mapping services and problem areas. Each color-thread line indicates a person's walk/travel. The exercise was aim to: community mapping, observational walks and network relationships. Following, *Re-Imagine Lincoln Street "on foot"* generated data by indicating formal and informal design



Figure 2. Exercises 1 and 2 of the Participatory Design Workshop in Worcester, MA.



Figure 3. Exercise 3 of the Participatory Design Workshop in Worcester, MA.



proposals. Each image represents the following: sidewalks, lighting, trash cans, sitting area, trees, their home location, and driving lanes. The results display the community considers a priority pedestrian access and safety. Lastly, *Re-Imagine Lincoln Street “up close”* created a collective visualization of two crossings at Lincoln Street. The participants combined common needs into perspectives by pinning images representing, activities and/or actions. Each perspective is the result of a co-design effort of all participants. Attempts to comment on a high-level speeding problem have proven to be effective in guiding participants to understand and appreciate the connections between different aspects of the street: people, crossings, resources, surfaces, policies/rules, services and a proposal for a fork roundabout. All the perspectives re-claimed the pedestrian space. This confirms Gehl’s statement that “*People gather where things are happening and spontaneously seek the presence of other people*”<sup>12</sup>. They gather bike lanes, sitting areas, accessible sidewalks and landscape. The Exercise was aim to: participatory action design, collective remarks and reporting/sharing and revalidating needs.

Overall, the PDW for the Greenhill community, was highly satisfactory in terms of number of participants and level of participation that contributed valuable information. The community has, it is hoped, gained enhanced self-respect from being listened to, and their views respected, as they are the local environmental experts. The “from above” exercise helped participants trace their experience and understanding of the Lincoln Street. The “on foot” and “up close” exercises, on the other hand, not only led the participant’s attention to location of the problems but were an appropriate way for the community to collectively share ideas and reinforced a sense of pride and awareness.

The effectiveness of a community-based project depends largely on the level of participation of local people in the community. Therefore, it is important that knowledge learnt in the PDW should be used to apply in actual project planning and follow-up activities. Specific activities include the following: Community consultation and revalidation should be an ongoing process; Participants have their own sets of issues and priorities, which need to have due weight in the decision-making; Effective

community participation requires a learning and action process on the part of the communities, not only identifying problems and possible solutions, but actually taking part in practical actions; and Following project related activities should be closely spaced, in order to keep the momentum and interest of the community.

### **From those who are kids: storytelling for El Caño**

Since 2013, the tCSE has organized the “Workshops of Arquitecturas Colectivas” in communities in San Juan, PR. The Workshops are the tCSE most valuable *teoría*. Behind the interventions are processes, images, texts, drawings and maps. The “urban disobediences” organized through collectives, volunteers, residents, and students constructed new “situations” to be added in unfinished urban cartographies.

In 2020 the *Workshop of Arquitecturas Colectivas III* will be with the communities adjacent to El Caño Martín Peña in San Juan. El Caño Martín Peña is a polluted and flood prone river channel and those who live around suffer the consequences, especially children. This gets worse, when six out of ten children live below the poverty level in Puerto Rico.<sup>13</sup> But children have the right to shape their surroundings and find solutions to live in a safer, healthier and happier place. “*The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.*”<sup>14</sup> The participatory design methodology proposed by the tCSE, to draft the children’s view is *storytelling*. According to Derr, Chawla and Mintzer “*For many cultures, storytelling remains an important means of understanding who we are in relation to the larger world.*”<sup>15</sup> In this case, the Martín Peña communities’ children would establish their relation with the body of water and with each other *cuerpxs* as a collective searching for better living conditions.

What are ways to build together? How can we develop a project designed from the spatial, collective and in turn personal imaginary? Naturally, narration is a significant beginning. Telling stories is inclusive, familiar and close. By telling, everyone manages to relate. The



Figure 4. Children: Sarangeli Santiago, Raúl Santiago e Imaris Santiago, in the 1980's in Cantera, Caño Marín Peña. Picture taken by José A. Santiago Reillo.

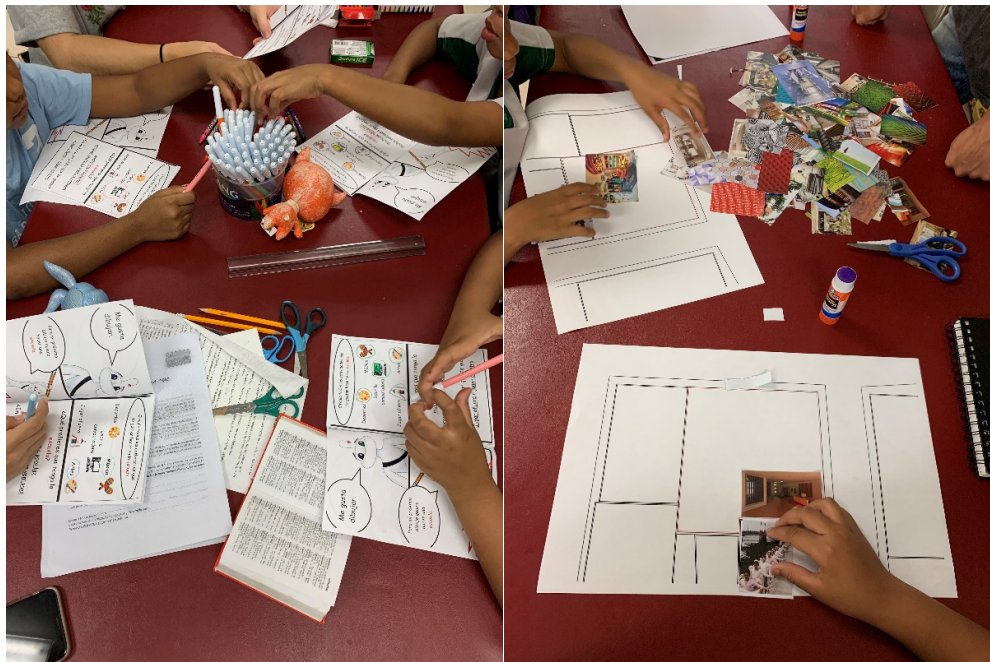


Figure 5. Participatory design methodology of storytelling with children of Barrio Obrero San Ciprián in Caño Martín Peña from architecture students (ARCH2020 WI2019 School of Architecture, Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico.)

narrative occurs from: the personal, the communal and the spatial. It is an expression created from the imagination located in the urban. Storytelling from the relational, spatial and contextual attempts to describe a story / space using three narration techniques. First, the invention of a trip where the child is called to go through a sequence of events, second, the story that is built using three or more fables among themselves, and, finally, the story that compares what it is with what could be. This alternative practice of participatory design builds semantics in design. The mutual learning that emerge from the narrative will shape new visions of spaces that define a new culture of the place. Space-constructing or space-telling requires new modes of enquiry and action, *“which have since been developed through current endeavors, moving from providing a gendered analysis of architecture and its multiple forms of representation, to the production of work inside and outside the academy where subjects, selves and spaces are understood to be performed and constructed rather than simply represented, and where forms of action – in the pedagogical and professional environment – are prioritized, both to challenge sexism and also to engender more equitable conditions.”*<sup>16</sup> If we continue to plan from a utopic cartography, we make buildings, streets, sidewalks, parks and plazas incapable of being inhabitable. It is essential to design considering how people use these spaces, or how their behavior modifies them and vice versa.

## Endnotes

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. 583.
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