A Project of Projects

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During the past decades, with the growing complexity of our cities, changing urban situations, dramatic shifts in development conditions and distorting transformations in society, it has become clear that the traditions of all-encompassing master planning and static land-use planning are incapable of steering sustainable development. Nevertheless, in many contexts worldwide, planning systems in place remain in line with these approaches — some stubbornly confident in their value and others merely out of tradition. In most cases though, confusion and doubt prevail on the urban planning scene. Yet traditional land-use planning prevails more by lack of alternatives than by conviction or inertia of legislation. At the same time, however, there are brave attempts to adapt new urban planning methods and tools to address the contemporary urban condition. Across the globe, experiments have followed different directions. The LA21 process in Essaouira, Nakuru and Vinh distinguished itself through its co-productive interplay of vision formulation and strategic urban projects.

**TWO REGISTERS, THREE TRACKS AND A KEY**

Since ‘by accident’ all LA21 cities at the start of the Programme were involved in a process of evaluating and revising their master plan (as requested by official procedures), the LA21 Programme began with a discussion of the on-going planning process. In all three cases, the master planning tradition was the prevailing legal planning tool and review of its weaknesses and strengths, adequacy and significance was a meaningful first step towards initiating new approaches. A common concern in all three cities was the comprehensive, inflexible character of the master plan, which disconnected the planning effort from urban reality. On the other hand, the image of the urban future underlying the master plan often was very conventional and not at all mobilising. Through the uniting of local and global expertise and knowledge, the Programme explored and tested a more strategic and innovative form of combining long-term stimulating visions with strategic urban projects. It can be stated from the outset that only in Nakuru did a comprehensive new approach prevail — and the legal mechanism for planning was changed. Nonetheless, the approach adopted in various degrees in the cities is grounded in two very different and not often combined sources. On the one hand, it was largely inspired by three decades of achievements in strategic structure planning (see chapter six). On the other hand, it was informed and complemented by a series of younger, but promising, experiences over the last 15 years with urban design projects (for example, Masboungi 2002).

Given this double origin, it is no wonder that the approach advocated by the LA21 Programme employs two registers. First, vision formulation (general concept development) serves as an appealing frame of reference that steers urban development. Visions generate a general, open and flexible development strategy and frame social commitments which strive to enlarge the civic realm, to enrich the urban culture and create new, sustainable urban space; they are premised upon attractive long-term perspectives and the structuring of the city as a whole. Visions strive to fulfil fundamental urban planning goals (sustainable development, urban coherence, qualitative density, urban culture, diversity, solidarity and democracy). The abstraction of visions (allowing for adaptation to
evolving circumstances, yet protecting non-negotiable, consensually agreed-upon principles) are made concrete through the second register, which is the development of strategic actions and projects to test and realise components of the visions. Actions can be programmes, interventions and projects of all kinds and strategic urban projects play a key role within this register. Strategic actions and projects confront visions with a specific context or the realities of urban life and development: a real site, a concrete problematic, actual programmes, limited resources, actors in flesh and blood with tangible interests and legitimate [or other] concerns. The time perspective here is short to medium-term and the scope is limited: a specific node, a crucial place, a special quarter, a problematic area, or a vexed question. Their structural position accounts for their leverage and inevitable spin-off effects. In addition, the mediating quality of such projects rests in the fact that they engage actors, often with diverging agendas, to strive towards a workable synthesis, frequently in previously contested territories. As such, these projects provide a real life ‘learning-by-doing’ experience in co-producing the city. Finally, the visibility of such projects is such that they do not disappear in the anonymous grey fabric of the city — their feasibility and ambition strengthens and eventually revises the long-term vision. The Spanish urbanist Joan Busquets claims these two interesting registers — visions and actions — can together be understood as a [urban] project of projects [Busquets 2000].

Between these two registers, strategic structure planning activates a third track, that of communication or debate. Debate stands for combined action. After all, the contemporary city and the urban project alike are a complex combination of a wide variety of elements, aspects and dimensions and necessarily a co-production that implies broad social support and the involvement of very different actors (including inhabitants and users). In other words, intensive communication is a condition sine qua non. But, in the end, debate is also a medium of harmony and of ensemble that, as in the performance of music, brings together different melody lines and instruments and guides different notes of the discursive discourse into synergy. The qualification of space (see chapter five) through design is the key to the interplay between the two registers and three tracks.

**INTERPLAY(S) OF VISIONS AND ACTIONS**

As is clear from the case study cities, the relation between action and vision, between the structure plan and strategic urban project, is neither hierarchical nor need be understood as a succession of linear phases. In reality, these two registers — with their different scales and time-frames — are in continuous interaction. For example, in Essaouira the proposed series of urban projects for the medina surroundings (fig. 7.1) — for Bab Doukkala, Hôtel des Iles and Bab Marrakech — would simultaneously strengthen and make tangible the visions of a compact city confined within its walls (fig. 7.2) and a city of hospitality and heritage (fig. 7.3), experienced in the multiple uses of the void surrounding the medina wall. Through design research on the surroundings of the medina wall, the abstract visions were refined, amended, polished, and revised; above all, they were substantiated. Heritage was no longer a conceptual notion, but a tangible reality which has, amongst other things,
fig. 7.1 Essaouira: Surroundings of medina wall project, see chapter 3.

fig. 7.2 Essaouira: Compact City vision.

fig. 7.3 Essaouira: Heritage City vision.

fig. 7.4 Nakuru: Park-edge project, see chapter 2.

fig. 7.5 Nakuru: Eco-City vision.

fig. 7.6 Vinh: Lam Riverfront project, see chapter 4.

fig. 7.7 Vinh: River City vision.
to do with a concrete historical wall and a colonial heritage of separation. Most importantly, however, the elaboration of projects clarified and qualitatively changed the manner in which these specific and concrete elements influence urban experiences (appropriation, representation, etc.), both in the practices of daily life (children playing in the shadow of the wall, women gathering at a place) and in the more celebratory and unique moments of urban life (ceremonies or festivities). Finally, the vision substantiated by images and life experiences was able to frame design research in its attempts to mediate between particular needs — such as the request of the hotel to expand — and the collective cultural and social interests to maintain and improve the unbuilt space surrounding the wall.

In Nakuru, the concrete problematic of the dilemma between landscape and urbanity (visible in the thresholds, fence, water pollution, waste, etc.) led to the proposal of an edge park (fig. 7.4) as mediator between nature and city, between the national park and the adjacent neighbourhoods. In turn, this project contributed to and substantiated the vision of Nakuru as an eco-city (fig. 7.5). In Vinh, the proposed development of the Lam (fig. 7.6) and Vinh riverfronts expanded the vision of a river city (fig. 7.7) to embody an ecological component, whereby the city could function as a sponge (to deal with the issue of flooding) and strengthen the vision of a green city, with interconnected public open spaces.

In short, the iterative interaction of visions and actions balances conceptual exploration alternates with concrete investigation, intuition with substance, intellectual with practical research, and poetic force with rational argument. Visions and actions maintain a dialectical relation, oscillating between thesis and antithesis, crystallising in a (temporary) synthesis of both vision and actions. Visions become layered, enriched and substantiated while, at the same time, remaining open-ended, providing perspective and able to steer and direct — but not dictate — future investigations and actions. Visions progress through a series of temporary and ever-evolving syntheses as new actions are developed. Concrete strategic urban projects and actions unite and canalise different contested urban forces and make more apparent the visions. In their conception, they must also be understood as embodying a certain degree of openness, expressed in the selectivity of its strong lines that represent its essence, but, at the same time, unveil its adaptability and flexibility. As such, the interplay of vision and projects is a form of planning that stands far away from the normative and abstract master plan.

**KEY ROLE OF STRATEGIC URBAN PROJECTS**

In the development of the city, strategic urban projects play a key role. By definition, an action and therefore a project changes something and (re)organises discontinuities. Strategic projects have lasting effects that alleviate urban needs, deal with a problematic and are collectively experienced and evaluated. This is what projects do. They realise things — small and large — concretely. It must be noted, however, that not every project is a strategic urban project. Strategic urban projects are distinguished by their capacity to change the urban reality in three ways.

First is their structural impact and leverage effect. Strategic urban projects do not merely make a difference — they make a *fundamental* difference. They turn the tide, in a lasting way, of the fun-
damental characteristics of a city. In Vinh, this is evident in the project for the revitalisation of the Quang Trung Housing Estate. The project would not only substantially and directly change the living environment for its thousands of residents, but more importantly, it would re-qualify the central urban spine of the city, in turn celebrating its monumentality, collective realm and historic symbolism (fig. 7.8). The proposal for the edge park in Nakuru (fig. 7.9) and urban park in Essaouira (fig. 7.10) are other obvious examples. These projects turn the rejected backsides of their respective cities into attractive urban fronts by fundamentally altering the relationship of city and nature; these park projects organise a shift in the global perception, functioning and structure of the city. In all three cases, although these strategic projects deal with a limited and specific part of the city, they impact the whole. The leverage effect has to do with the multiplier a project possesses, a kind of projective catalyst. To stay with the same examples, in Vinh the upgrading of open space and redefinition of the corridor along National Highway No. 1 [the western edge of the Quang Trung Estate] would stimulate similar improvements in the immediate surroundings. The proposed parks of Nakuru and Essaouira would radically alter the adjacent urban fabric, stimulating upgrading, renovation and transformation through the introduction of better housing and the reversal of the orientation of whole neighbourhoods, the provision of public space and the attraction of activities. In addition, the parks’ edges implicitly encourage a host of economic functions including recreational and tourism facilities and urban agriculture.

Secondly, strategic projects have the capacity to link, mediate and organise multiple actions and actors. Their spatial role in mediation stems from the numerous gaps and anomalies of the built environment, including missing or divided urban functions and the coexistence of contradictory or opposing elements (see chapter five). In the Vinh estate, the existing appropriation by inhabitants of the open space and do-it-yourself extensions of housing units impede not only on the public realm, but also threaten the safety of individuals (since extensions are often precariously
The proposal reorganises the collective space as a patchwork of activity areas structured by a central, connective spine and cohesively expands the apartment blocks — expanding individual units and creating new fronts with public spaces and better accommodated private uses at the ground floor. On the overall urban scale, the proposed parks of Nakuru and Essaouira mediate between city and nature achieving a hybrid, commonly shared third term — an urban park. Another example of the mediating quality of the strategic project on the urban scale is the accommodation of the surroundings of the medina in Essaouira. It introduces a highly differentiated and speculative open space in between the urban fabric of the medina and the city extra muros. It does not simply fill the gap left by urban histories — as paradigms to reconstruct cities would advocate — but, on the contrary, mediates by articulating and accentuating the interruption and simultaneously inverting its meaning. Indeed, the project transcends separation, inherited from the colonial era, and transforms the zone neutre, the `non-space’ of distance and defence, into a public realm that not only facilitates appropriation and exchange, but also organises a dialogue between different urban tissues. In short, it mediates difference, the essence of urbanity. As well, strategic projects mediate by organising links and creating synergies, which consequently implies that strategic urban projects are multi-dimensional and combine spatial aspects with social, cultural and economic components addressing very different stakeholders, sectors and authorities. An example of this is the bus park project in Nakuru (fig. 7.11) in which spatial reorganisation is employed to safeguard and strengthen the synergies between the transferium function and the market activity of the area.

The third qualifier of a strategic urban project concerns feasibility, visibility and innovation. Strategic urban projects are feasible projects and this aspect radically differentiates them from the modern master plan. The feasibility of strategic projects is evidently linked with their medium-term perspective and the intermediate scale. However, it also necessitates their well-embeddedness within the existing policy sectors and their use of realistic estimates of development potentials and the capacity of a city. Intensive interaction during the planning process with all involved actors and stakeholders speaks for itself and is indeed a pre-condition. At the same time, creativity and innovation are necessary to transcend the grey and unconvincing compromises which often result from rounds of consultation and participation. The city produces grey by itself. Strategic urban projects are of no use if they only add to the grey ness of the city. On the contrary, strategic urban projects must make a fundamental difference and in that sense they are usually very visible. They change the face and perception of the city. Strategic urban projects make a difference; they are indicators of future development — producers of identity. They support and strengthen the identity of the city and its inhabitants. This characteristic necessitates considerable design skills and aesthetic sensibilities, qualities that are often neglected in urban development initiatives.
THE INEVITABLE NECESSITY OF URBAN DESIGN

The strategic urban project, as has become clear, sounds almost like a mission impossible. It has to comply with an entire repertoire of difficult criteria. It has to be structural, multi-dimensional, visible, innovative and beautiful. The recent developments in the design discipline offer some necessary help. The reinvention and resurrection of urban design over the past 15 to 20 years has reinvigorated the field by reformulating the roles and methods of urban design. Experiments and projects in a wide range of contexts and situations have demonstrated the essential role of urban design — proved through the development of strategic urban projects. The fact that urban design literally contributes to shaping the city is evident — it deals with forms, the quality of urban space and built form. At the same time, there are a series of other tasks for urban design that are perhaps less visible, but by no means less important. Urban design is more inclusive than design of objects as such. Urban design is investigative and can be termed ’design by research,’ which, amongst other things, includes the acquisition and use of local social knowledge by communication and participation. Urban design is also a tool for negotiation towards a workable synthesis of conflicting realities [see chapter five]. Design helps in the formation of agreements and becomes, in some instances, a legal instrument [see chapter six]. Thus, urban design is an essential component that steers the entire development process of strategic urban projects.

Urban design is premised upon a fundamental rethinking of the discipline of urbanism following the ’crisis’ of modernist planning methods in the post-war welfare state and various self-critical reflections that occurred amongst professionals in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike the modernist master plan, urban design, in general, and the strategic urban project, in particular, are not considered final. On the contrary, they are seen as intermediate steps, mediums that explore the potential of urban sites, allows for the achievement of qualitative consensus, and safeguards and accentuates existing spatial qualities. They are structured in a manner by which the essential principles and concepts — derived from the specific reading and opportunities of sites — are not lost throughout the long and complicated development process, while also allowing for flexibility to deal with changing circumstances.

Urban design, vision-making and strategic urban projects start as ’designerly’ research [see chapter five]. The process is initiated by a penetrating reading of the site, in which its history, characteristics, the structural grounding of the site in the urban morphology and the problems and opportunities of the given urban site are analysed. Designerly research explores the identity of the study area and creatively speculates upon the possibilities to reorganise or develop the site with qualitative urban spaces and urban activities. A variety of fields of knowledge are deployed in this analysis: urban history and morpho-typology, urban ecology and landscape, societal issues, such as the power game of decision-making or processes of inclusion and exclusion, architecture and urbanism, and, last but not least, local social knowledge concerning daily life in particular places. From the initial stages, architectural knowledge is present as a way to question the existing realities and spatial structures and the desired interplay between future urban space and urban functioning.
Each specific urban condition of the case study cities saddles them with constraints, but these historically produced conditions also contain the cities’ potential. Both constraints and potentials have spatial dimensions and spatial impacts. They often are complex, contradictory, poverty-ridden, and full of contestation and poorly identified, if not totally neglected. As such, they are unsuitable for development initiatives. Design research helps to sort things out, to reformulate issues, to select priorities and to deal with conflicts. This knowledge provides the material for the (re)formulation of visions and the elaboration of projects. The general visions as much as the strategic projects developed through the LA21 Programme therefore inscribe themselves in the spatial identity of cities and are generated from the inherent potentials. As already mentioned, this type of research work oscillates between analysis and synthesis, between vision and action, between intuition and rationality, between the global scale of the city and the concrete scale of a building, and between an existing and desired spatial structure.

NEGOTIATION BY DESIGN

Initial ‘designerly’ exploration results in a temporary synthesis, a spatial development proposal that combines contradictory concepts and requirements that only design can deliver. Such a proposal contains images, plans and sketches that are sufficiently concrete to be inviting, attractive and targeted to provide insight; they are at the same time precise enough to get detailed feedback and pre-evaluate feasibility and abstract enough to absorb suggestions and comments during debate without fundamental compromise. In this explorative phase, the urban design schemes thus function as eye-openers that unfold new potentials of sites and re-qualify the interest of possible actors. They are also sufficiently rooted in local reality and based on local social knowledge recognised and appropriated by the people for whom they are intended. All of the visions and strategic urban projects developed during the LA21 process have provided tangible bases upon which to debate and negotiate. The interactive and co-productive design process employed participation in a manner that overcame some of the weaknesses in other ‘participatory’ planning processes. The LA21 process must not be considered design by negotiation, but negotiation by design.

In design by negotiation, talking replaces design, the latter offering hardly more than the weak formulation of a pale verbal compromise between divergent and non-focused opinions. Negotiation by design allows for multiple dialogues between urbanists, policy makers, inhabitants and special interest groups, investors and stakeholders. Design as a medium of reflection and negotiation is not passive, but serves as an active and evolving instrument through which suggestions are absorbed, processed and incorporated, alternatives generated, and conflicts resolved. The art of urban design fundamentally lies in the maintenance of a productive dialogue achieved through a process of continual revision of visions and projects without sacrificing their essential qualities and characteristics while also strengthening their qualities, coherence and persuasiveness. The process described above is without doubt a complex one that requires professional management and great design
skills. Weak development proposals inevitably lead to ‘grey’ realities. At the same time, an inspired ‘masterpiece,’ which allows neither margin for negotiation nor design evolution, is equally unproductive for the process. In this respect, contemporary urban design distinguishes itself radically from the modern project and allies with the descriptive tradition in urbanism [Secchi 1992; Corboz 2001; Dehaene 2002; De Meulder and Dehaene 2004] or what Manuel de Sola Morales calls ‘the other modern tradition’ [1989]. The creative force and skilful use of the capacity of design to mediate have to proceed hand-in-hand through this process in order to be successful.

In Essaouira, for example, in general ‘verbal’ opinion, nobody considered the surroundings of the medina as a meaningful, interesting continuous space until plans and sketches demonstrated the latent value and quality of this former zone neutre and revealed its capacity to develop its present use so as to become an exceptional space that could host important activities for the city (i.e. the proposed conference centre and high quality commercial facilities, and the Hôtel des Isles with a conference centre). In Essaouira, Nakuru and Vinh, their respective dune-forest, immense national park and waterfronts were seen, in caricature, as immense voids, ‘other’ worlds unrelated to the day-to-day realities of the city. The existing edges of these cities were related to their respective prime natural landscapes as mere backsides. A major achievement of the urban design schemes (visions and strategic projects) developed during the LA21 Programme was the fact that ‘normal’ perceptions were inverted — the backsides were recognised as potential new fronts. Even though the implementation of these projects is in an embryonic phase, an important shift in attitude and perspective by all actors has occurred.

Another interesting example of tough negotiation by design was evident in the proposed scheme for the Nakuru bus park. In this case, the heated disputes over use and occupation of the ground surface between traders and dealers on the one side and transporters (matatu, buses, etc.) was resolved by a clever spatial re-arrangement which allowed the two to co-exist in a rationalised manner. LA21 Programme examples of this sort are endless since space allows for multiple use: and/and solutions are possible instead of the more difficult context of either/or.

REFERENCE PLANS AND STRATEGIC URBAN PROJECTS

Though the step-by-step, negotiating process described above is undeniably complicated, the basis of agreement is eventually expressed by way of a reference plan — a drawing. Such a plan is neither a cocktail of individual interests, nor an uninteresting grey compromise, but a precise and engaging translation of a collective and coherent development vision with structural and strategic principles. The visions developed are translated into a reference plan with ‘consensus’ and therefore legitimacy. In the LA21 Programme, formal ratification by the different actors involved and an appropriate proclamation of its existence was recommended. It is in this instance that the first ‘Urban Pact’ (see chapter six) was made.
The reference plan then becomes the basis upon which concrete interventions and real execution plans and strategic urban projects are developed. Of course, in practice the process is evidently not linear, but as already stated an iterative process which constantly shifts between various scales, concerns, and priorities. Throughout this process, the three tracks (vision, action, co-production) discussed at the beginning of this chapter, repeat themselves. The design process organises the interplay between vision, project and co-production, while management of the design process further stimulates the interaction between co-production and the reference plan.

A KEY AND A HERO

Urban design is a powerful tool. It plays a key role in the formulation and realisation of strategic urban projects. It is a crowbar for innovation and a gate to unexpected solutions. It has the capacity to serve as a medium for negotiation and consequently leads to strong, stimulating and simultaneously open-ended plans, leaving margins for evolution and adaptation; contradictions can transcend into productive paradoxes.

While urban design is the ‘key’ to the strategic urban project, the ‘hero’ is urban space itself (see chapter 5). No matter how good an urban design might be, in the end it is merely addressing the endless capacity of and possibilities existing space offers, such as making use of the resourcefulness of space and the mediating capacity of space, Strategic urban projects deal with urban space and urbanity remaining, by definition, related to an urban place. Organisation, servicing and management of city form are consequently the main tasks for urban policy and fundamental dimensions for a vast majority of strategic urban projects. They are structured in a manner by which the essential principles and concepts — derived from the specifics of the context as well as related to an interpretation of sustainability — are not lost.
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