Architecture-as-urbanism for uncertain conditions

The concept of the “adaptable city”, the theme of Europan 12, is about advocating creative ways to incorporate uncertainty and irresolution into urban design. Indeed, this is the challenge for architecture as it seeks to re-engage with city-making in order to foster urban continuity and cohesion. We call such practice “architecture-as-urbanism” or “architectural urbanism”. By re-situating Europan with respect to such “in-house” (Europan) or “outre mer” (overseas) references, we will uncover strategic principles that instigate urban continuities which do not rely on the tangible continuity of the built environment or on any other overall plan, providing alternatives to either the “poeticality of fragmentation” or the certainty of the master planning mode of operation. Indeed, the results of the Europan 12 session could enrich a relevant international debate. The exploration of twelve winning projects on seven sites under the sub-theme of “in-between time”, will demonstrate how their strategic approach confronts transition as perpetual urban uncertainty. The sites are: Wien-Kagran, Austria; Seraing, Belgium; Donauwörth, Germany; Vilnius, Lithuania; Kuopio, Finland; Assen, Netherlands and Rouen, France.

“Stop-action frame” project sites

“Cities appear as a stop-action frame: nothing happens for interminable periods, when suddenly we arrive at built results seemingly by fast-forward...like a series of discontinuous jump-cuts the landscape transforms in a sequence of disorienting new frames...”

Although this quote does not yet fully apply to European cities, it is apparent that stop-action frame project sites are becoming more frequent in the different Europan sessions. They are mostly abandoned, marginalized sites, at the end of their life cycle. Further on, we will see that such sites are increasingly situated within the stop-action frame economies of cities and countries. A recurrent critique of the European institution concerns cities entering the competition with stop-action frame sites where “nothing happens for interminable periods” and asking young, inexperienced architects, and now landscape architects and planners, to “arrive at built results seemingly by fast-forward”. Nevertheless, Europan has indeed become one of the rare European platforms to address such complex issues, which are seemingly not easily tackled by the usual municipal modus operandi. Often, innovative projects may succeed in mobilising urban actors, in formulating an imagery of possibilities and in creatively contaminating the everydayness of the city. Usually, the formulation of the project brief for each site becomes the instigator of such innovations, as we will see later in relation to the E12 sub-theme “In-Between Time”.

Three stop-action frame sites ready for a jump-cut: the Wien-Kagran site in Austria (fig.1) is an area squeezed between two big rail infrastructures. It is a somewhat fragmented zone, but with good road access enhanced by the adjacent IKEA store. Vienna’s need to house a population influx has increased the pressure to place housing in this area. In Seraing, Belgium (fig.2), the closure of a steel plant has opened up the area to local housing development, based on a master plan prepared by the city to cope with future urban housing pressure. In Donauwörth, Germany (fig.3), the municipality was recently informed that the adjacent military base is to be closed, raising the question of what to do with a site whose scale dwarfs the city centre. The municipality is looking for the phased development of a robust concept that will incorporate the existing military buildings.
Four sites interminably locked in stop-action frames: Viša Viçosa in Portugal (fig. 4) is part of a larger territory sidelined and abandoned after the decline of the marble industries. The municipality is looking for alternative ways of reusing the existing site, despite the apparent lack of an urban dynamic. In Kuopio, Finland (fig. 5), a school and athletic facilities situated on a site cut off from the rest of the city by railway lines, have come to the end of their life cycle. The municipality seems perplexed about the future of this area, except the need for it to be reconnected to the city. In Assen (fig. 6), but also – because of the financial crisis – across most of the Netherlands, the municipality is shifting from a policy of large-scale master plans with a fixed timeline for implementation, to approaches that encourage smaller scale, market driven developments. In Assen, the challenge is how to use such an approach to convert a former industrial area into housing. The municipality wants iconic buildings (row-housing and apartment buildings) to be placed at designated locations on the site as start-up developments. The Rouen site in France (fig. 7) is a mixed industrial and housing area by the River Seine. The project brief calls for the insertion of processes on the different scales affecting the site, such as a station that will connect to the rail network in 10 years’ time, or urban development along the Seine, plus connections across the site linking the two banks of the river through the island of Isle Lacroix.

Transition as the challenge for architecture-as-urbanism

Surprisingly, we find that conditions of uncertainty, instability and irresolution have been part of city-making since the beginning of the modern era. “Project Zagreb”, initiated by the same authors, explicitly addresses the question of how architecture and urban planning can operate effectively and innovatively under conditions of instability. They introduce the notion of transition as a perpetual state of instability with uncertain outcomes, not as a passage from one stable condition to the next. They investi-
coincide alternately with the client (municipality or private investor) and with those affected by the project’s implementation.

The quest for new forms of architectural engagement with the city has been Europan’s preoccupation, both through the articles published in the different session catalogues and through the winning projects. The notion of the “urban-architectural” scale coined in Europan debates is in fact operational rather than geographical, referring to how architecture can engage with the city.

In 2001, Pascal Amphoux introduced the notion of “architectural urbanism”, moving away from the typomorphological concerns of “urban architecture”, in an article entitled “The included third as urban project” relating to the Europan 6 results catalogue, theme of “In-between Cities”. In fact, the term “architectural urbanism” was coined as a challenge to architecture to become an integral and open planning culture cannot be defined in a simple master plan…”, while the existing practices of master planning are rooted in rigid and static methodologies which make it very difficult for citizens, [for] architecture and therefore for the whole structure to adapt…”

Strategies for unfolding project content and implementation processes

Strategy is in fact the mode of operation that most of the winning teams choose to employ to unfold both project content and methods of implementation that are receptive to change. Drawing on “in-house” and “outre mer” references on strategic thinking in transition, we outline four strategies that elucidate the approaches employed in the twelve winning projects. Our exploration will inform the practices of architecture-as-urbanism. Specifically, the strategies are: a. Radical Incrementalism, b. The Trojan Horse, c. Mighty Unfoldings, d. Malleable Ecologies.

The radical increment strategy

Radical incrementalism is a design strategy that uses accumulation as a way of catalysing change while generating urban character and identity in the process. The increment combines radicalism with an evolutionary strategy. Such an approach can pique the interest of project investors and gradually introduce changes into the habits of the project actors, including investors. Incrementalism is deployed only within the project, rather than as part of the city’s wider typological policy. The increment is multifaceted and usually comes as a package of actions. It generally works partly on the surface (ground) and partly on buildings. Its radical capacity to catalyse change, in the case of the E12 projects in question, depends on how the parts of the package are combined and on the diversity of timeframes and programmes allocated to them. The first group of four projects reflects such an approach: in En pointe!, runner-up, Wien-Kagran (AT) (fig.8), the increment
consists of a residential armature typology with arched openings on the ground floor (references to Aldo Rossi’s typological approach to the city, explicitly mentioned in the team’s interview with Europan Europe).

The surface is the ground, openly assigned to a diversity of public and collective activities. In fact, “the schedule becomes the software of the surface”, as the team notes. The radicalism of the increment lies in its multi-temporality. The surface seems to be susceptible to unforeseen changes, inviting the city into the project, whereas the building armatures maintain a robust posture and inform the surface schedule. In the case of the runner-up project in Assen (NL), Urban nature (fig.9), the built element of the increment is threefold. It consists of the repurposed existing building fabric, the new linear residential building bars that form L and U-shape formations, and lastly the rather small, rectangular infrastructures of the collective programme. The surface of the increment is programmed with small-scale activities that extend into the water and are shared at the collective and public scale. The radicalism of the increment lies both in the “à la carte” proximity between buildings and surface, and in the “Clouds” and “Rules”, i.e. the ability to detect change in assigned proximities (“Clouds”) or to keep re-adjusting such proximities through frequent “referendums” (“Rules”). What we find here, in fact, is a sort of democratic radical incrementalism.

The team behind the winning project in Donauwörth (DE), Kept soil (fig.11), shifts the “Radical Incrementalism” strategy from managing the “action package” constituting the increment, to unfolding the “action package” through logistics. In other words, the team employs accumulation by a meticulous, step-by-step, somewhat fragmented transformation of the derelict military camp. In this case, the built part of the increment in this case is the existing, repurposed building structures. The surface is the existing unbuilt ground, which acquires a sacred character by being kept intact through the preservation of the current planted areas.

In the case of the runner-up project in Rouen (FR), On the move (fig.10), the built part of the increment is bound by a “prototypological” approach which attributes a diversity of programmes to various objects. The surfaced part of the increment in this case also gets a “prototypological” treatment, creating combinations with the built component. The radicalism of the increment lies both in the “à la carte” proximity between buildings and surface, and in the “Clouds” and “Rules”, i.e. the ability to detect change in assigned proximities (“Clouds”) or to keep re-adjusting such proximities through frequent “referendums” (“Rules”). What we find here, in fact, is a sort of democratic radical incrementalism.

The radicalism in this case is about the new proximities engendered both in the built part of the increment between the existing and newly inserted structures, and the ways in which the “sacred” surface infiltrates into, under or alongside the hybrid buildings.

The trojan horse strategy

By Trojan Horse strategy, we mean that what we see of a project is not all that we actually get. In other words, the project teams employ strategies of infiltration by partially disguising the nature of their projects. In fact, they recognize the catalytic agency of form which builds value through proformative qualities 10. In such cases, architecture has the opportunity to perform a complex urban role that is traditionally assigned to infrastructure, as an instrument of connectivity for the city-in-the-making.

In the runner-up project in Wien-Kagran (AT), Kaleidoscope (fig.12), we see a reasonably successful and typical urban block, but we also get an urban valise which is quite handy for infiltrating into “alien” environments such as the project site’s XL-scale commercial activities. The “urban valise” is, in fact, a disguised infrastructure in the form of a multiuse building volume whose geometries allow changes of use between offices, shops and parking spaces. An
artificial private ground situated on the top of this volume serves the residential programme that extends into the building further up.

In the case of the runner-up project in Kuopio, (FI), *Somewhere over the train flow* (fig.13), we see a rather dense linear building armature but we also get a multi-bridge that covers the train rails and connects the project site to the adjacent area. Its disguise lies also in the fact that it is positioned horizontal to the railway tracks, not vertical as one would expect a bridge to be. The porosity of the ground floor of the buildings makes possible a multi-crossing over the rails via a major linear public space.

"...the building aims to kick-start the awareness of the site and the transformation process" in the words of the winning team in Assen (NL), *Embrace the present* (fig.14), but also partly in the words of the project brief itself. In this case, we see a linear residential block but we also get a multi-infrastructure that redefines the existing canal and repurposes part of it as a small harbour with private boats. In addition, it sacrifices its roof-top for a parking garage accessed by electrically operated elevators, further emphasising its “Trojan Horse” quality. Its durable linear structure seeks to work like Renzo Piano’s “casa evolutiva” (references from the interview), available for appropriation by its future users.

In the runner-up project at Vila Viçosa (PT), we see a *Tupperware party* (fig.15) and we also get a major linear public space partially covered by an elaborate canopy. In fact, the party is an example of how the infrastructure performs. The team aims to trigger awareness of the site and to foster the transformative process by events, in a way reminiscent of the endless field of Superstudio in the 1970s and the relational systems of SANAA’s “Field Party”. The proposed new buildings, however, seem redundant given the current inoccupancy of the site’s building stock.

Mighty unfoldings

In this group of projects we focus on the methods that the teams suggest for implementing their proposals. The fact is that operating in a state of transition neutralises any confidence in the exactness of future end-states and their reverse phasing into the present. Increasingly in Europan sessions, therefore, the teams formulate both the content and method of implementation through alternative scenarios, blueprints and roadmaps for action. We can see such approaches emerge explicitly as far back as Europan 6 in the previously mentioned article by Amphoux, where he introduces a definition of the project’s complex context that addresses the interweaving of the “what” and the “how” in the heart of “architectural urbanism” (physical, temporal and pragmatic aspects of the project context). A similar approach was introduced by the author for a study on the Europan 5 results 11.

In examining the Europan 12 projects, we see how they develop a complex package of this kind first by multiplying the time-related agents in the project, which become mechanisms for adding value. In other words, a back and forth trajectory takes place between the
“what” and the “how”, to maintain both open-endedness and specificity. The “Mighty Unfoldings” group consists of the winning project in Rouen (FR), Que m’Anquetil?, the runner-up in Donauwörth (DE), Multiple city and the winner in Vila Viçosa (PT) Between landscapes. Multiplying time-related agents begins with the unearthing of existing temporalities hidden from plain sight, the temporalities of larger urban/natural territories. Sometimes these can be identified by simply establishing synergies between professions in the teams, as is the case with some of the E12 sites: the unearthing practices of landscape architects and urban planners combine with those of architects.

In fact, programmes and uses embody such temporalities, which inform the winning projects. The concept of pioneer uses and spaces, coined by the winning project in Rouen (FR), Que m’Anquetil? (fig.16), uncovers a different approach from those frequently encountered in Europan. In fact, we realize that the temporal events are not just time fillers until the final project takes over, but become active and valuable agents which engage new audiences with the site, thereby actively influencing its future. They catalyse stop-action frame sites by adding value and thus opening up new possibilities.

We find an emblematic winning project back in the Europan 9 session in Bordeaux (FR), La ville plus près (Bringing the town closer), where the project was supposed to grow from the site through the active agency of pioneer uses. Why wait for the next 10 to 20 years to benefit from urban dynamics through connection to the railway network? Let’s start now! Let’s begin by harnessing the timeframes of the existing city to infiltrate the island-site by stitching together existing soft mobility networks and by offering attractive living by the waters of the Seine (Que m’Anquetil?, winning project, Rouen (FR)).

In the case of the runner-up project in Donauwörth (DE), Multiple city (fig.17), we see a polarity being created by plugging the former military camp project site into the urban archipelago’s transport infrastructures. By this means, the project is transformed into a device for managing urban flow. The plug-in device is celebrated through a red, ribbon-like ramp, which overcomes the problems of the big level difference between the city and the project site. In the winning project in Vila Viçosa (PT), Between landscapes (fig.18), the abandoned project site gets some help by recruiting the extended former industrial area through an “à la carte” matrix of actions.

All three projects recruit larger territories to sidestep the absence of urban dynamics. In other words, they allow everyday temporalities from adjacent territories to revitalize the project sites, in tandem with the unearthed temporalities of the site itself. By hybridising temporalities, they bring added value to the sites.

Another way to add to the panoply of time-related project agents is through calls for open design initiatives, under which pioneering urban actors are invited to join an “urban brain storming”. In the case of the Que m’Anquetil? winning project in Rouen (FR), the team delivers an impressive matrix of connections between project instigators (municipality, SNCF, region, etc.), urban pioneers (individuals, associations, schools of architecture, art, communication and advertising, ministry of culture, etc.) and pioneer uses and spaces. The nature of these uses and spaces may be either ephemeral or evolutionary.
temporary or permanent. In the case of Multiple city, the runner-up project in Donauwörth (DE), the “urban brain storming” takes place with the opening of an “Ideas Store” and continues with a series of further calls for contributions.

In the latter project, the modus operandi is a blueprint of very precise and meticulous actions. Part of this blueprint is a Development Agency to be formed by the city council. Temporal uses, like the pioneer uses mentioned above, are invited to colonize the site for the first three years. The “Forestall City”, as the team calls the new entity, which emerges from the transformation of the former military camp, offers a robust spatial frame for subsequent public life, where spaces of potentiality are easily integrated through everyday tactics. In the case of Rouen, the winning team provides a “general frame of action” that allows the continuous emergence of specific plans on different scales; a frame which is paraphrased by the winning team in Vila Viçosa (PT) as a system, or rather a matrix, of dynamic actions that interact with citizens and open up new prospects for action in space.

Malleable ecologies

In fact, the project teams want to be among the urban actors who instigate networks of urban institutions that support and maintain the city. In other words they aim to participate in the creation of urban ecologies. In this case, ecology means a more or less stable set of relationships that can be maintained over time and gives order to the city, to relations between people and to the flow of goods and ideas. Such a definition of ecology invites all sorts of hybridisations between manmade and natural environments. The teams, in fact, call for such hybridisations to increase new proximities between groups and to attract unlikely combinations of programmes and uses. To do so, they stretch the ecological ranges and implode programmes. They profit from unusual juxtapositions and groupings by superimposing flows originating in a diversity of scales. They simultaneously recontain territories to instigate the incubation of new ecologies, and carefully breed new territories through multiscalar connections.

These are the strategies deployed in the following projects: winner in Seraing (BE), Synergy, runner-up in Wien-Kagran (AT), Monument in fertile country and winner in Kuopio (FI), Savo nueva.

The superimposition of living, producing and consuming becomes a strategy for imploding programmes in the winning project in Seraing (BE), Synergy (fig.19). The shared vegetable gardens become an asset for the residential areas as well as for the proposed market area. The ground surface acquires a third dimension to accommodate such activities, to filter the flows from the wider urban territory through the project site, and to define public spaces at the edge of the project site that can connect to future adjacent developments.

In the case of the winning project in Kuopio (FI), Savo nueva (fig.20), we witness a similar strategy of implosion on two levels. The first seeks to enhance coexistence between older and younger populations in residential clusters, the second to create a cultural hub (the Health Campus) that exploits the good road access to attract a trans-local catchment area. The proposed linear public space acts both as a bridge over the railway lines connecting the project clusters and fosters porous clusters open to the rest of the city. As regards the runner-up project in Wien-Kagran (AT), Monument in fertile country (fig.21), the project itself becomes the pivotal node of such malleable ecologies. The transversal devices, the project’s plates and spaces of movement, as the team defines them, intertwine through the project site, yielding all sorts of unlikely proximities between programmes. Radical combinations arise when the plates and building volumes of the project are corroded by the flows of adjacent ecologies such as mobility networks or public parks. Radical combinations are achieved by stacking programmes and using parts as buffer devices to manage the unwanted proximities that arise through such combinations. For example, the office blocks become noise barriers between the highway and the residential structures. To emphasize the gesture, any parts of the building volumes exposed to noise are amputated.

In the first two cases, malleable ecologies allow
Avoiding architecture’s irrelevance to city making

In addressing both “in-house” and “outrme references to architectural urbanism or architecture-as-urbanism, we discovered that the perpetual instability of the urban environment, full of stop-action frame sites and economies, dates back to early modern times but is also manifested differently in various European and North American cities. We also found that the struggle of architecture-as-urbanism to engage with an “adaptable city” concept was and will continue to be a European concern, as evidenced by the discourses and projects in the increasingly rich European archive.

We went on to explore how this hybrid vision could be used to review the range of intentions expressed by the E12 teams (mostly architects, but also landscape architects and planners), in order to show how architecture-as-urbanism adopts strategic thinking to navigate in states of transition. In fact, they demonstrate a range of aspirations to achieve broader objectives by means of strategies, introducing tactics that exploit the opportunities created by those strategies. We discovered the generative power of the radical increment, plus the catalytic agency of form that builds value. We were pleasantly surprised to see the increasing importance of time-related agents with a catalytic role that adds value to space and revitalises stop-action frame sites, feeds into form and opens the doors of the design process to contingencies. “Thinking of form through time could be one way to prevent architecture becoming irrelevant” (excerpt from interview with the runner-up team, En pointes!, Wien-Kagran (AT)), has been the motto for such an approach.

By diversifying the project’s temporalities through malleable ecologies, the teams show the value of embedding design within the functioning city by reconfiguring the hybridization between urban ecologies and by instigating unusual collaborations amongst urban actors. Further on, the group of “Mighty Unfoldings” projects showed that the “project package” cannot be delivered without an explicit approach to implementation through roadmaps and blueprints, represented by diagrams and text and dynamically related to architectural renderings of possible endstates. Such an approach requires the admission by the teams that the European project can make no impact on the sheer scale of some of the sites (Multiple city, Donaumwöhr [DE]). Having realized this, they shift from simply instigating the small scale practices of everyday urbanism to suggesting changes to everyday urban institutions. In other words, they act as double agents, representing the interests both of clients and of those who will be affected by their actions. It will be exciting to follow their “uncertain futures” and to see how the host cities respond to the pressure of getting perhaps more than they bargained for. The challenge for them is to take advantage of these outstanding practices of architecture-as-urbanism to inform the way their urban institutions operate. Indeed, that is the role that the winning Europan teams increasingly aspire to play.