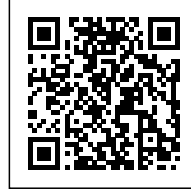# urbanNext Lexicon

The Insurgent Architect.
Extended interviews with David Harvey by Mariano Gomez Luque & Daniel Ibañez

THE INSURGENT ARCHITECT

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Categories: Daniel Ibañez, David Harvey, Essay, expanding design practices, Mariano Gomez-Luque, No Density, Politics and economics

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Mariano Gomez Luque | Daniel Ibañez Your writings touch an important nerve for us, as architects. They represent a powerful effort to understand the dynamics of capitalism in spatial terms. Your work is an invitation to critically exercise our imaginative powers, and simultaneously a call for action—for finding ways to translate into the domain of space socio-organizational forms that could challenge those already set, defined, and crystallized by the capitalist machine.

Can you tell us more about your personal relationship to the design disciplines? In your most recent book, *The Ways of the World*, you write: "As an urbanist the whole question of architecture and the role of planning was never far from the surface of my thinking." Can you elaborate?

David Harvey I have always been interested in the question of the production of space, and have been writing about it for many years. The discourse has a long tradition; some people think that it was invented by Henri Lefebvre, whose 1974 book, *The Production of Space*, grounded much dialogue, but it was not. In fact, many urban planners from the 1960s, like John Friedmann, were linking planning with the production of space in parallel to Lefebvre's work.

Spatiality has a very expansive meaning for me: there are relative spaces, relational spaces, absolute spaces. These nuances are crucial to understand if we are to have a stronger connection with the ways in which things get shaped on the ground—this wall here . . . those steps there . . . a bridge over there . . . All of these relative spaces of the city are constantly being produced and reproduced. Then there are symbolic spaces, which have both a relationality and a meaning that are far greater than their mere physical manifestations. Many of these symbolic spaces have the power of a certain centrality, which we see exercised politically in cases like Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011, or in the Occupy movement in New York. I'm interested in these manifestations, and of course, in the people who are making the walls—the engineers, the architects.

During the 1960s, many architects considered themselves urbanists. Even people like Rem Koolhaas (who I'm not a great fan of) were participating in exciting debates at the Architectural Association in London, where there was a social sense about cities. I gave some lectures at the AA back then, and talked with architects—among them Richard Rogers—who were interested in the urban. Later, regretfully, people became exclusively concerned with building activity, and consequently forgot about the urban context.

Architecture is a world that I have always been close to, because architects have a view of space, although theirs is rather different from mine. Sometimes we have conversations in which we think we are talking about the same things, but we are not. It's a challenge, in the sense that there is

something to be learned from this discordance.

MGL | DI In *The Ways of the World*, you refer to your participation as a jury member, together with architects and engineers, in an international competition for a new city in South Korea. Could this episode be understood as your way of actively becoming an "urbanist"? Could you tell us more about that experience?

DH We were in charge of making a judgment about the projects submitted to the competition. It was a very peculiar experience. I thought it was an opportunity to do something experimental. I had read a lot of what fellow jury member Arata Isozaki had written, and was very attracted to his ideas about urban form. I was openly against creating determinations—spaces limited by fixed form and program; on the contrary, I wanted to see how different aspects and variables of projects interacted at the level of the social, and how they addressed nature, technology, production, employment, and political subjectivities.

In the end, the jury did not select a winner; instead we selected a group of projects whose authors were supposed to continue developing and consolidating their proposals. It was an interesting learning experience, getting the engineers' perspective. I was a little shocked by what the architects on the jury had to say; they were mainly interested in a discussion about the symbolic qualities of circles and squares.

MGL | DI Did you find a common ground for communicating with architects in the context of the jury deliberations?

DH Everybody seemed interested in what I was trying to say, in the elements of my criteria for evaluating the projects. But of course some people were horrified when I said that many of my ideas came from Marx. They said: "What!?" That's often a conversation stopper. People usually get caught in the ideological trap (whatever we may mean by that) when talking about Marx, often ignoring the power of his theoretical framework of understanding.

MGL | DI Historically, interventions by architects and urban designers and planners have been circumscribed to what we traditionally call urban zones. However, as you have pointed out, the "urban" is undergoing a radical change of scale; it now operates at the level of the whole surface of the planet. Your work has challenged divides like society/nature or urban/rural, opening up new spaces for design intervention beyond cities. Do you see emergent spaces where designers can effectively contribute to more socially just and ecologically sane environments? What do you think are the key problems to address—or illuminate—through new research?

DH I am increasingly interested in the politics of daily life, to the degree that the qualities of daily life are partly embedded in the nature of the environments we construct. This entails a constructivist kind of approach. Without being environmental determinists, we could say that as we create environments, environments create us. This is part of what I call dialectical utopianism, a condition that I hope architecture practice can situate itself within.

> **MGL | DI** In *Spaces of Hope*, you talk about the figure of the architect, in both a metaphorical and concrete sense, as an agent who can create and discover "spaces for new possibilities." One of the most contradictory dimensions we confront as architects is the fact that, regardless of our role as "creators of space"—perhaps a naïve claim after all—space is actually the outcome of forces beyond our control, capitalist, institutional, or political forces. How do you see this contradiction?

DH Well, I don't know, that's for you to worry about! (Laughs)

It's a real dilemma. I can, in fact, talk about the production of space, only to see later how what I say gets co-opted by capital. The same applies to architects, at least to those who have social consciousness and try to work in a progressive way. They may see that their work gets co-opted by capital, and therefore may feel that in some way they contribute to the reproduction of this logic without wanting or intending to. And although architects are not alone in this, they do have an advantage, because they know what the implications are when a developer says *you have to do this*, which clearly exposes who is ultimately in charge of the process of the production of space. At that point, the creative architect, or what in *Spaces of Hope* I call the "insurgent architect," has to think about how to subvert this power relation: How can you use the knowledge and the technology at your disposal to achieve goals that are different from, or alternative to, capital's goals?

It is important to understand that given the power of capital in shaping the construction of the built environment, strategies of subversion are needed. In that sense, architects can be more confrontational; they can sit across the table from developers and oppose them.

> **MGL | DI** In the last 40 years, we have seen how, with the rise of neoliberalism, architecture has become a form of spectacle in itself; buildings have turned into a kind of luxury commodity.

DH It all depends on which part of the world you are in. Most of the so-called starchitects went to work to China because they thought that there were no constraints there. But Alejandro Aravena, for instance, is approaching the question of housing in a form that is more progressive than I have seen in other places. I think his idea of building a basic structure that you can later update, or complete

more or less as you want, is a good idea. It's not radical, but at least it's open, and allows the participation of the inhabitants, mixing social governmental action with a more traditional self-building approach. That concept is not new, it came out of radical anarchist thinking, and is now being appropriated by the World Bank in what I think is another example of a good idea that gets co-opted by capital.

MGL | DI Do you think that design disciplines can devise strategies of opposition to the relentless pace of capitalist urbanization?

DH In Uruguay, people have set up cooperatives to build their own houses, investing either through labor or with actual money, and they have produced very high quality housing. They are now reactivating some abandoned buildings in downtown Montevideo, refurbishing them and turning them into housing. These are modest but very good examples of alternative ways in which communities can participate in the building process. You can see a clear connection between the logics of production and the politics of realization.

MGL | DI Architecture seems to be an organic component of the capitalist tendency toward endless growth. It's still largely driven by building activity, by a process of construction understood in a positivistic way. But there have been recent attempts to rethink the agency of architecture in terms of "unbuilding" protocols—mechanisms of building subtraction and preservation. Do you see these as effective strategies of resistance to capitalist urbanization?

DH Everything should be on the table. Today more than ever we need to think both politically and socially about the city; these dimensions have been buried under the process of urbanization, which is basically anti-city. This process works against public space and urban life in an effort to turn the city into a tool of capital. In this regard, there are various strategies to reconstruct the city on the ruins of capitalist urbanization. One is to create spaces that can assemble political expression, and which can liberate the public from typical strategies of enclosure.

Is it still possible to introduce various commons into the city, and if so, how? The objective here is to create a sense of the city as a totality that has both a social and a political meaning that people can act upon, feel comfortable with, and have dialogue and even conflict within. We should be open to new possibilities, as opposed to continuing simply filling in spaces, following an endless impulse for growth.

MGL | DI Increasingly, design schools are in need of new frameworks of understanding in order to unpack the complexity of urbanization processes as a precondition to design intervention. At

the GSD's Urban Theory Lab, we have been developing the conceptual framework of "planetary urbanization" under the guidance of Neil Brenner. Planetary urbanization builds upon Lefebvre's hypothesis of the total urbanization of society, updated as complete urbanization of the world, surpassing the idea of the city as a distinct urban form. What do you think about merging critical urban theory with design as part of a multidisciplinary effort?

DH It is crucial to come to terms with the dynamics of urban processes as they exist right now. We cannot continue to think about the city as an isolated terrain. It has been stunning to see social movements, like Gezi Park in Turkey or the Brazilian Spring, become system-wide, rapidly spreading to other cities—cases like the antiwar protests on February 15, 2003, when millions of people were in the streets in a few hundred global cities, opposing the Iraq War. I remember being in Athens the night of the occupation of Syntagma Square. One of their slogans was borrowed from the Indignados movement in Spain, something like: "Why is it taking you so long?" There is a kind of a contagion among cities, and an increasing global awareness about these movements.

Politically, the urban network is not only a capitalist construction; there is also a sense of the urban that is not clearly articulated, and we cannot know when it may be invoked or suddenly erupt. I don't think anybody could have predicted what happened on February 15, 2003. It was a shock, and it changed politics. We can now imagine that a project that we are undertaking in a particular place or city can have effects on other cities and places, through what we may call relational spaces. This relationality is intangible, or as Marx said about value, immaterial and supra-sensible, but objective. A lot of politics are intangible and supra-sensible, but have objective consequences.

MGL | DI Your famous dicta "It is, in practice, hard to see where 'society' begins and 'nature' ends" and "There is nothing unnatural about New York City" have been very influential for new Marxist work that is often described as urban political ecology. The work of scholars in this field engages with the long overdue task of reinserting questions of nature and ecology into the urban debate via a historical materialist analysis of urban flows, such as water. How can the analysis of a particular material flow help untangle the economic, political, social, and ecological processes that form contemporary urban landscapes? How, for instance, can studying the consumption rates of cement, as you described at yesterday's lecture, help scholars unpack urban complexities?

DH At the beginning of *Capital*, Marx talks about "concrete abstraction," and so I thought that it would be interesting to "abstract from the concrete." (Laughs) I think the purpose of the general theoretical frame is to create a cognitive map around what it is you are trying to do and how you are

trying to do it. When you actually start doing these things, you often find that you can't possibly do them all. But there is a distinction between people who go and focus on details without having a general map, and those who struggle to create such a map.

In my work, I try to be conscious about how details connect with this cognitive map. William Blake said something along the lines of the truth lies in a grain of sand, a notion in which everything converges. I see a big difference between students who deal only with the grain of sand, and students who focus on how the grain of sand is internalized within many other forces, even when you can't possibly track all of them. You have to contextualize your work. And you have to speculate. This can't be all hard science and hard information; you can get hard science and hard information about particular things you are working on, but those facts look different when you pull back the telescope and look at them in the context of the broader picture. This is the moment when the fun comes in, the moment of speculation.

> **MGL | DI** Indeed, our work is usually confined to the "grain of sand," whether we like it or not. But even the most discrete intervention is tensioned and incorporated into myriad material, social, political, economic forces. In this sense, we wonder where you think design agency lies in terms of facing the complexity of capitalist urbanization critically as well as operatively.

DH I think designers have a great deal of experience in shaping environments and spaces in surprising, unexpected manners, or in ways that open possibilities that were not there before. In that sense, designers *do* have agency, but I think this agency is circumscribed by political and social context.

In the current conjuncture, for example, I don't think that the only valid form of intervention is related to organizing public participation. There are instances in which you have to be more subversive and underground, so to speak. Democratization is fine, but when you have a population that has only one thing in mind—like, "private property is sacrosanct and that's it"—and you are interested in talking about collective forms of design, you may not get away with what you want to do through public participation. Therefore, you may want to find ways to demonstrate how different collective forms of living or working have something to offer. You may have to go against prevailing public opinion. As Gramsci elaborated, there is "common sense" and there is "good sense." Radical social consciousness is good sense. We may find that very often the common sense of the population is neoliberal, individualistic, private property-driven sense, and if you go with your idea of public participation, people may simply want to create something like an American suburb.

Agency is about creating, or opening, alternatives. People learn from experience: if you can create an urban experience that is radically different from that which is the convention, then the common sense over here will start looking at the good sense over there.