Architecture of Generosity

: An Invitation

Warning: Architecture profession you are about to graduate into may or may not meet your ideals!
Architecture of Generosity: An Invitation

It is difficult to defend that a career in architecture will necessarily result in the creation of social benefit. The weakening of public institutions that have previously created agency for communities, has reduced architects’ participation in city making and narrowed it to the service of real-estate development. Many times, in recent years, there have been celebrations to a new generation of practice that defies this constricted role. We have proof of concept of whatever it takes to address our most pressing challenges. Yet, we are still facing a crisis, not of resources, but of impact.

This studio will look at new models of practice while participating in the Custom House Partnership. We will join in the creation of public spaces where agency comes alive and witness a neighbourhood coming together to crowd-source, codify and open-source proven models of social enterprise with community members and cooperatives. These models can be then used to animate any space in their community affordably, quickly and effectively for place-based social and economic impact.

We will contribute to change in Custom House because change is better done together - and this will require a shift in our current mindset and approach:

- From treating people as beneficiaries to supporting them as active citizens
- From working alone to working together with common purpose
- From single issues to root causes
- From under-utilised individually owned assets to fully-utilised collective assets
- From reinventing the wheel to sharing everything that works
Superpool + Civic

Directed by Gregers Tang Thomsen and Selva Gurdogan, Superpool is a research-based architecture and urban design practice operating out of Istanbul and Copenhagen. This unit is conceived together with Jonathan Robinson, founder of Civic, a social enterprise based in London that is dedicated to empowering communities to create place-based impact. The unit will explore architectural practice as a social enterprise in a real-life site alongside the engaged community of Custom House Partnership.

What is a social enterprise?

The thinking behind current social enterprise models can be traced to the mid 17th century – simultaneous with the first phases of industrialization, a search also begins for models of co-operative, mutual benefit enterprises. Structured as either for-profit or non-profit, a social enterprise is a commercial organization that has a specific agenda that operates to achieve a balanced financial, social and environmental set of objectives.
Is architectural practice a social enterprise?

One could argue that achieving a balanced financial, social and environmental set of objectives is the goal of every architecture project. Yet, there is an unrest in the scene - our cities and impact upon the globe do not reflect this balance. Many scholars question the role of the traditional client-architect partnership and pursue alternative and emerging practices.

The unit will start with the research of case studies on architectural practice models and will have in-depth engagement with a selected group. The short list below is a teaser for the types we will identify together over the course of the first semester.

**Fab labs**
Practices that specialize in the engineering and construction of experimental and technically demanding projects creating a stream of revenue to enable social agendas. (ex: www.situ.nyc)

**Creative hubs**
Practices that manage of co-working spaces to pool more funds and talent to a core team. (ex: www.atolye.io - www.birmingham.impacthub.net)

**Forensic architecture**
Practices that develop, disseminate, and employ new techniques for evidence gathering and presentation in the service of human rights and environmental investigations.(ex: www.forensic-architecture.org)

**Online architecture services**
Practices that create building systems that can be manufactured digitally to provide services online. (ex: www.wikihouse.cc)
Where is our site?

Custom House is located in the London Borough of Newham, in close proximity to the Royal Victoria Dock. The dock was the social and economic heart of Custom House from 1855 until it closed in 1980.

Custom House is ranked within the worst 6% of England’s most deprived neighbourhoods. The area has been the attention of numerous regeneration efforts over the last thirty years. Yet, the narrative from residents typically emphasises the ‘broken promises’ and the ‘ever dwindling community spaces and facilities.

48% of residents were born outside of England, with many coming from Nigeria, Ghana, Bangladesh, India, Somalia and the Philippines. 32% of residents do not speak English. In recent years, Custom House community has begun to self-organise around civic renewal and a community owned vision of regeneration.
What is Custom House Partnership?

The Custom House Partnership, being convened by Civic, is supporting a group of ‘unlikely allies’ from residents to entrepreneurs, the police to shop-keepers, doctors to councillors to re-imagine and re-make the place they call home. Abandoned high-street shops and development land adjacent to the Custom House DLR and Crossrail station is being used as a platform for developing and proving a radically different model of local economic renewal and regeneration.

Goals for research phases:
- Developing a critical understanding of the history of social enterprises with a focus on the emerging models of architectural practice
- Developing case studies on architectural practice models and establish in-depth engagement with selected practices
- Engaging with Custom House community
- Exploring different forms of media for understanding and sharing insights about context

Goals for design phases:
- Designing a spatial intervention and / or a model of practice
- Creating a body of material that expresses the issues and the stances developed
- Presenting to Custom House community
- Making our learnings open-source
### How will we engage Custom House Partnership?

Designing each student’s engagement with Custom House Partnership in a meaningful, mutually beneficial and ethical way will be the core conversation of this unit. How will we design our architectural practice in Custom House? Will we be creating spatial propositions? Creating an architect-in-residence program? Organize block parties for co-creating public spaces? **Could we use this diploma unit to test our future practices?**
Tutors

Selva Gürdoğan is an architect. After her employment at Office for Metropolitan Architecture, in 2006, Selva initiated Superpool together with Gregers Tang Thomsen. Between 2013-2019, she co-directed Studio-X Istanbul, an urban laboratory of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. Since 2018, she is leading the effort on behalf of Superpool to establish City and Children Studies Master Program at Kadir Has University in collaboration with Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Gregers Tang Thomsen is an architect. After his employment at Office for Metropolitan Architecture, in 2006, Gregers co-founded Superpool and directs all design projects out of Superpool's Istanbul and Copenhagen offices. Between 2013-2019, he co-directed Studio-X Istanbul, an urban laboratory of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. Since 2017, Gregers is leading Superpool's participation to Urban95 program initiated by Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Jonathan Robinson is an entrepreneur, author and anthropologist. Jonathan is a founder and former global director of Impact Hub that incubates thousands of social enterprises from over 100 physical spaces around the world. Jonathan is a co-founder and director of Civic. He has launched social ventures with partners ranging from the Cabinet Office, British Council, Tate Modern and the Guardian Media Group, to Unicef and peace entrepreneurs in Afghanistan.

Tatjana Crossley is an architectural designer based in London. Her research focuses on sensorial experience and psychology of immersive spaces. She completed her PhD at the Architectural Association, Master’s at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design and Bachelor’s at Rice University and worked at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in San Francisco.

Who else will be our conversation partners?

Once the scope of architectural practice is expanded beyond traditional client-architect partnerships, a new window opens up for collaborations. Neither Superpool, Civic, Custom House Partnership nor this unit are isolated forerunners - we are joining other creative minds and voices who are imagining place-based changes in many places around the world. Over the course of the unit, we will share experiences with collaborators from Istanbul, Amman, Tirana, Madrid and New York.
Reading List

A New View of Society and Other Writings; Robert Owen, 2019

A World of Three Zeros: The New Economics of Zero Poverty; Zero Unemployment, and Zero Net Carbon Emissions; Muhammed Yunus, 2018

Architecture from Without, Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice; Diana Agrest, 1991

Are We Human?: Notes on an Archaeology of Design; Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, 2019


Banker to The Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle Against World Poverty; Muhammed Yunus, 2008

Cities for People; Jan Gehl, 2010

Empathy, Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics; ed. Robert Vischer, 1993

Essential Proudhon; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 2012

How to Study Public Life; Jan Gehl, Birgitte Svarre, 2013

New Architects 3: Britain’s Best Emerging Architects, 2016

Phenomenology of Perception; Maurice Merleau-Ponty

See Yourself Sensing: Redefining Human Perception; Madeline Schwartzman, 2011

Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature; Donna Haraway, 2015

Social Audit: Management Tool for Co-operative Working; Freer Spreckley, 1981

The Production of Space; Henri Lefebvre, 1992

The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One; Hanzi Freinacht, 2017

The World as Will and Representation; Arthur Schopenhauer, 1966

What is an Apparatus?: And Other Essays; Giorgio Agamben, 2009

References

1 - A Way Propounded to Make the Poor in These and Other Nations Happy; Pieter Corneliszoon, 1659

2 - The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class—and What We Can Do About It; Richard Florida, 2018


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