The Power of Design and the Design of Power:
Equitable Urban Typologies Challenge

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Schedule: T-TH 1 – 6 pm (tentative, with modifications on Zoom for those living in different time zones: studio will be taught as hybrid with limited, voluntary in-person meetings).

Credits: 0-12-9 G
Required of: First year SMArchS (Urbanism)
Fulfills DUSP Practicum requirement and urban design certificate.

Zoom: First session on Thursday, September 3, 1:00 pm ET: https://mit.zoom.us/j/95440483833
INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Urban Design (and allied design disciplines with a capital “D”) has been the practice of a privileged few. And as a manifestation of power, urban design has assisted in translating client(s’) desires to control the city through the shaping of objects and buildings, voids and landscapes, and infrastructural networks. Moreover, our accumulated urbanity parallels the constructions of cultural narratives and a supposed collective memory, reflected through what a society chooses to build and preserve, erase and destroy. Within the context of the American city, the protocols and processes through which cities are shaped, and their constituent urban elements and symbols, have served a world view of the parties in charge of the process, often not the majority of those affected by decisions. We acknowledge in this studio that Urban Design and its allied fields often fortify exclusivity over the process of city making, despite wildly optimistic claims of participatory process—which still must be translated into physical form by “D”esigners.

This studio seeks to challenge both the inherent and historic inequalities and exclusions which Urban Design entails as a discipline by asking the most critical and broadest of questions, yet demanding that physical plans—novel and radical typologies of equity—be produced as the result of the process. Whether visionary and futuristic, or quickly implementable, we require that these new typologies challenge the way the city is designed. Focusing on the question of agency, and while acknowledging the growing role of communal participation, we do not necessarily propose to discard the role of any allied fields as professional agents in creating and negotiating solutions at the urban scale. Rather, with a belief in the unique value of the urban designer, this studio asks students to develop new equitable typologies for a site within metro Boston that disrupts the decision making inequities that persist in making the same old built forms and typologies. Can a new set of urban design agendas and professional skills emerge from pushing for more equitable urban forms?

Through a series of exercises, students will first analyze specific case studies of American cities, through the lens of social, racial and environmental justice, and discrimination in order to expose and ‘dismantle’ conventions of urban design and planning. The second part of the studio will focus on a site in metro Boston where students will work with an outside client to design new equitable typologies, while considering the physical design of buildings, landscape, and infrastructure.

METHOD

The studio, divided into two parts, will explore these questions through a series of exercises.

Part 1. ‘Dismantling’: identifying recurring moments of power in objects, voids, networks, and urban patterns across a series of cities. Dismantling requires uncovering the context and meaning behind the design of urban spaces and objects, and uncovering the mechanisms of power that produces them. Recognizing and understanding the social-political-economic powers that shape the city is critical to our understanding of the context in which we practice.
Part 2. ‘Re-visioning’: carrying a new agenda based on an understanding of how things have come to be. The act of revision on the city that is centered in questions of race and power attempts to design a more equitable and just environment. Re-visioning additionally proposes a continuous process, one that re-writes the outcome, thus emphasizing previously buried histories and provoking a different trajectory, a new path forward.

ASSIGNMENTS

Part 1. ‘Dismantling’ (weeks 1 – 6)

Assignment 1 Dismantling the city: Object, Void, Network (week 1)

1 week, Individual
Deliverables: 10 slide deck, axonometric drawings of elements (analytical)

This exercise is meant as an introduction between you, the city, and the studio (figuratively and literally). Consider where you are. Present and analyze the urban condition of your home city, a place you are familiar with and have access to.

Identify a figure-void relationship in the city. Who built it? Describe the figure (object or building). What power is it aligned with, present or historical? How does it perform? Describe the void. Is it physically empty or is its blank-ness achieved through other means? Has it always been a void? How is its void-ness maintained? Is the void aligned with a different power structure from the figure? How does it perform? How are both figure and void used by the broader city surrounding them? How do they relate? Are they of similar scale or dramatically different? Have they been affected by changing regimes? Have they been co-opted for new purposes than their original programs?

In a similar line of questioning, identify a piece of urban fabric – a section of the city that is formally coherent/consistent/identifiable. How was it built? Whose values defined the rules that shaped it formally? Who was it built for? Who was it not built for, and how were they kept out? Has it remained frozen in time or has it too been changed by new relationships within the city?

Suggested readings and resources for Assignment 1:

- Kevin Lynch, “Form Values in Urban History”, in Good City Form, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 5-36
Assignment 2  Mapping the American City: Narratives of Vulnerability (weeks 2-3)

2 weeks, Groups of 3
Deliverables: 10 slide deck, series of drawings at 3 scales (1:50,000, 1:10,000, 1:1000)

Risk, broadly defined, is disproportionately experienced by urban communities – specifically communities of color in the American context. Historical patterns of planning and policy have made cultural racism physical by corralling Black and Brown residents neatly into harm's way, either by geography (situating Black and Brown neighborhoods in the lowlands, on infill, in close proximity to hazardous industrial uses, etc.) or by disinvestment and exclusion from formal systems of wealth and investment back into the urban fabric (redlining, racial covenants, etc.) which in turn makes the physical qualities of the built environment in these neighborhoods more at risk to extreme weather.

For this exercise, small groups will be assigned, one for each of the following US cities: Baltimore, Houston, San Francisco, and Washington D.C. Students are asked to produce a series of drawings at three urban scales (citywide, borough/township, and neighborhood; 1:50,000, 1:10,000, and 1:1000 respectively) that address the following categories: (1) Demographic and Economic structures, (2) Social and Environmental Risk, and (3) Urban Morphology over time.

* An MIT GIS tutorial/workshop will be arranged to help support this assignment, but for asynchronous learning resources consider DUSPViz’s GIS & Mapping Tutorials, as well as GIS Tutorials from MIT Libraries GIS Lab and GIS Tutorials from GIS@Tufts.

Suggested readings and resources for Assignment 2:

- Melissa Checker, “‘But I Know It’s True’: Environmental Risk Assessment, Justice, and Anthropology,” *Human Organization*, 2007

Assignment 3  Dismantling Boston  (weeks 4-5.5)

2.5 weeks, Three Groups
Deliverables: 10 slide deck, series of drawings and maps at various scales

Building up on the techniques of mapping introduced in the previous exercise, this assignment will engage in a critical reading/mapping of Boston and the relevant areas defining the studio project site.
In three groups, students will analyze the city of Boston and its surrounding townships through three research lenses: (1) Environmental: the relationship between environmental systems and public open space, (2) Architectural: by exploring the history and evolution of housing typologies, and (3) Power and Urban Narratives: by tracing the histories, stories, policies and actions that served (and protested) the manifestation of control and power in Boston.

Suggested Readings & Resources:

- Resilient Boston Report, 2017
- Undesign the Redline Exhibition

**Part 2. ‘Re-visioning’ (weeks 6 – 12)**

**Assignment 4 Re-visioning the City: Equitable Typologies Challenge (weeks 6-12)**

7 weeks, Individual or small groups

Deliverables: TBD

This seven week design project explores the equitable urban typologies challenge through a city-owned site in Boston. The studio will collaborate with Urbanica - a Boston based developer group to work through the history, process and various stakeholder considerations in developing the site. Students will build on their understanding of object, void, and network as interconnected, power-encoding constituents of the built environment to imagine typological systems that position the site as part of the broader neighborhood and city at large. A proposed urban plan will include an exploration into typological solutions that incorporate (but are not limited to): a collective housing project (alternative community-oriented housing) of 120 units (the object), a public open space (the void) that complements this housing model and further contributes to the neighborhood, and programs and/or infrastructural systems (the network) that activate and connect them. Working individually or in small groups (preferred), and with feedback from and presentations by our partner developer, students will imagine new typologies that challenge existing urban patterns and forms and what they have come to represent.
EVALUATION & GRADING

The final grade will represent the balance of attendance, participation, engagement in class discussions, incorporating feedback, completion of assignments, individual growth over the semester and quality of work produced in the studio, with an emphasis on clarity and originality.

Ex. 1 – 20%
Ex. 2 – 20%
Ex. 3 – 20%
Ex. 4 – 40%

STUDIO CULTURE AND ABSENCE POLICY

Work in the studio will build sequentially. Therefore, your commitment to incremental development on a daily basis is of paramount importance. Charrettes before reviews will not suffice. The demanding nature and pace of this studio course necessitates your regular attendance and requires that deadlines are consistently met. In addition to lowering your grade, late work will prevent you from following the overall structure of the course. Magnification of your development as a designer is made possible by the collective nature of the studio. Group reviews are collective for a reason, as each of you has something to gain from your peers. Therefore, attendance for the duration of all formal reviews is mandatory. Greater than two absences from the studio without a medical excuse supported by a doctor’s note or verifiable personal emergency could result in grade reduction.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Massachusetts Institute of Technology students are here because of their demonstrated intellectual ability and because of their potential to make a significant contribution to human thought and knowledge. At MIT, students will be given unusual opportunities to do research and undertake scholarships that will advance knowledge in different fields of study. Students will also face many challenges. It is important for MIT students to become familiar with the Institute’s policies regarding academic integrity, which is available at Academic Integrity at MIT: A Handbook for Students.