

## **Open Jury 2011 – The Contemporary City**

**Emma Letizia Jones**

‘Type’, ‘typology’ and ‘typological urbanism’ – all terms used frequently in the recent AA Open Jury discussion loosely grouped under the title ‘The Contemporary City,’ and all terms that seem to be constantly surrounded with debate and conjecture as to their proper meaning and application.

In the graduate school presentations from the *Housing and Urbanism* and *Projective Cities* programmes, the attempt was made to analyse the contemporary city through understanding these terms and examining how they might be used as a way of restructuring the urban fabric. However in both cases we were invariably presented with an understanding of building type that was reduced to an examination of building ‘use’, with a resultant lack of critical examination of the typological discourses (influenced by economic, political or historical forces) surrounding the development of these various types. *Housing and Urbanism* focused on the revitalisation of the post-industrial periphery of east London, proposing new mixed-use insertions within the existing built fabric. There was an insightful precedent analysis given of various industrial building types – however, as these precedent studies demonstrated, a building’s function or use can often be completely transformed while its essential structure remains the same. Taking this into account, it might have been more constructive to examine the implications of and reasons behind the typological shifts being proposed on the site, and the extent to which these shifts can remain independent from building structure and form. Following this analysis, the potential resultant tensions between the transformation of building use and retention of built fabric could have been harnessed to increase the desired level of intensity on the site.

Of the two projects from *Projective Cities*, the first examined the use of the corridor as an urban planning device. Yet the creative potential that might have emerged from an analysis of this device remained untapped, as we received a presentation that was strictly limited to a precedent analysis dealing with circulation and planning in the form of diagrammatic studies. A more insightful reading may have emerged through the posing of questions such as, how can we begin to link the development and deployment of the corridor in its various forms to its changing historical context?; or, How might the device of the corridor produce a series of effects on the subject or a segment of society? The jury noted the example of Robin Evans’ analysis of the historically shifting significance of the corridor as a device for organising space and social life, as well as providing an effective means of sequestering the body as well as the spirit. Were a discussion of typology to approach an analysis of the corridor – or indeed any architectural device or building type – on these terms, the projects might approach a deeper understanding of the transformative effects of the practice of typology, and furthermore, how it might be applied to the contemporary city. This practice might also include an understanding of type as a translator – in other words, using the application of ‘typological urbanism’ as a way of transforming disembodied theory into a means of producing architecture; and in reciprocation, allowing that architecture to be transformed by the impulses surrounding it. Coming to terms with the harnessing of type as a translator in this way was one of the clear difficulties encountered by the various graduate school projects.

In contrast to these presentations, the two provocative undergraduate units offered the opportunity for countering the often-deemed tragic state of the contemporary city with a wry and subversive dose of comedy. Intermediate Unit 13, operating through an interpretation of Bataille’s concept of the ‘formless’, presented two projects investigating a transgression of established typological and social boundaries in the City of London. Through a foray into the underground rickshaw driver culture in the city centre, one project proposed the interrogation of the spaces ‘in-between’. These uncoded spaces, operating outside of established urban boundaries, then became key to developing notions of the formless within the urban project. Though based on fascinating precepts, the perhaps premature jump of this project to the presentation of a ‘final form’ that might look recognisably like ‘architecture’ highlighted a recurring challenge for architects working with the city as their canvas: That of developing a

narrative or dialectic relationship between the temporal or event-based experience of urban living with the making of architecture, which tends ever toward the monumental and timeless. The two projects highlighted the difficulty of negotiating the balance between stable and unstable structures in urban environments, and the need to protect fragile expressions of the temporal from being subsumed by the monumental within the urban landscape.

Diploma Unit 5 identified and researched a marginalised counter-cultural social group as a basis for developing the rules and parameters of their respective projects. One memorable scheme took the 'Burning Man' festival in the Nevada Desert as the context for a new architectural intervention. At this gathering of approximately 50 000 people, mutant vehicles cross paths with sacrificial temples made from the detritus of civilisation. These monuments are sacrificially burnt in a post-apocalyptic role-play on a mass scale. The event appropriates the desert as a tabula rasa upon which a temporal city and society can be erected – its dreams and desires played out through a highly controlled ritual concentration of energy; and then dispersed – leaving no trace of itself. By studying a counter-culture the students were forced to examine the forms that counter-spaces might take, drawing on the idea of an interchange between the forming of a structure or even a city and the forming of identity. As with Inter 13, the conflict of the permanent (the architectural project) with the temporal, embodied by these transient counter-cultures, was present. In both projects the 'tabula rasa' was used as a base on which to build on ideas relating to inhabitation. The struggle between temporality and permanence of dwelling was highlighted not by analysing the city as it is, but by constructing elaborate dreamscapes from the blank slate provided by nature. The Diploma 5 projects began to engage with the idea of the city through the very denial of its established conventional forms, demonstrating that the opportunity for play and experimentation need not invalidate the relevance of the projects to so-called 'real life'.

The forming and reforming of the contemporary city cannot be separated from society's desire to build a collective cultural identity through the modification of its environments. Ironically, by appropriating a territory devoid of this identity, Diploma 5 was able to engage most creatively with the contemporary city through its very absence. By constructing the boundaries of a built environment for a counter-culture in a non-urban place, the unit provokes us to think about the formation of the metropolis as a projection of mental life. As the open jury demonstrated, it is vital that students of architecture, both graduate and undergraduate, continue to frame ways of engaging with the contemporary city that reach beyond the jurisdiction of the urban planner. In order to do this we might imagine the communication of ideas about the contemporary city not only through a series of maps or diagrams, nor by the recounting of statistics, population counts, density patterns, building types and physical organizations, but through the spinning of a story: One that provokes us to imagine the making and remaking of the city as not only a physical act but also as a projection and embodiment of our latent dreams and desires.