Architecture, the political endeavour to deal with urban inequality and poverty: Lessons from Quito and Bangkok

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ACCA  Asian Coalition for Community Action

ACHR  Asian Coalition for Housing Rights

CODI  Community Organisations Development Institute

NGO  Non-Governmental Organisation

PUCE  Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador
Introduction

“I love architecture for its potential, but despair of architects for too often throwing away that potential in their stubborn attachment to a certain set of values.”

(Till, 2009).

There has long been a discussion around the concept of space, the factors that determine its production and the actors involved in this process. This discussion has revealed the political nature of space and how specific groups use it to control the population, exclude and marginalise minorities and modify the conditions in their favour. Moreover, the role of architects has been widely analysed and disputed showing an urgent need to rethink the praxis beyond the production of physical innovative objects and including a deeper reflection about the context in which these objects are embedded. This paper aims to bring a new perspective into this discussion by revealing the potential of architecture to be used as a political endeavour to deal with urban inequality and poverty.

The first chapter of this dissertation will analyse theories of different authors that highlight the political nature of space and architecture. To start, the first part of this chapter will reflect on Lefebvre's concept of Production of space (1974) and the social, economic and political aspects that influence this production. Other author’s thoughts will provide a wider understanding of how these aspects act in the capitalist system, which rules the production of contemporary cities, to intentionally produce scarcity, inequality, exclusion and marginalisation. Moreover, this analysis will discuss the effectiveness of recent initiatives that propose alternative ways of producing space as a reaction to the imbalanced reality imposed by capitalism. Finally, this section shows the characteristics that make the informal settlements in cities of the global south the perfect arena to generate alternatives ways of producing space.
Subsequently, the second section of chapter 2 will analyse the *post-political* reality according to Rancière’s work (1999). This analysis will include a discussion about the current role of architects in the process of production of space in this reality and the potential of architecture to transform this role. In addition, this section will explore the relation between architecture and politics, and adopt the concept of *dissensus* proposed by Rancière (1999) in order to create three lenses or principles to use architecture as a political endeavour to deal with the negative consequences of capitalism. Lastly, the third section of this chapter will conclude presenting the three lenses that shape the analytical framework of this dissertation: the political attitude, the use of aesthetics as politics and the role of architects in large scale processes of disruption.

The concepts used to build these lenses will be illustrated in the second chapter of this dissertation showing the action of two architectural offices that implement alternative ways of producing space in their praxis. The two case studies, Al Borde in Quito and Openspace in Bangkok, will be presented introducing a brief idea of the contexts in which these architects act and the factors that define these contexts. Moreover, an analysis of their projects will allow for the recognition of disruptive actions that transform architecture into a political endeavour to address social and political issues inherited in the contemporary cities of the global south. Finally, a discussion will end this chapter exposing the similarities and differences between the two cases and how the context in each example defines the action that architects adopt to disrupt the status quo.
Chapter 1: Exploring the political potential of architecture

This chapter draws on multiple theories that highlight the political nature of space and architecture to build lenses that connect these two elements through the action of architects as political subjects.
1.1 Space and Politics

The production of space

Space is a physical manifestation or product of society. This product cannot, however, be seen as a simple object but as the result of a sequence and set of operations (Lefebvre, 1974). In fact, the fundamental consideration in this theory is not the importance of the product that can be reproduced countless times by applying these operations but the operations themselves that are irreplaceable and unique. Their uniqueness is based on the idea that they can be performed by different social groups or individuals in a process of social interaction, interchange and negotiation (Müller, 2008). This understanding of space as an active dimension is represented in what Lefebvre calls a **spatial triad**, and implies three categories of space: perceived, conceived and lived. **Perceived space**, under this theory, is understood as the physical environment where everyday life occurs. **Conceived space** is the abstract field where bureaucrats and planners act, and power relations are established to transform physical space. Finally, **lived space** is where social relations take place and is shaped through the actual use of space and the involvement and participation of people (Lefebvre, 1974; ibid.).

Since space is a product of society, it is a reflection of social realities, and consequently shows the dominant power of some groups and their influence in the processes of production of space. Indeed, urban spaces must be understood as highly political elements that can be used to overpower and control societies and isolate specific groups (Lefebvre, 1974; Foucault & Rabinow, 1991). In his book, *The Production of Space* (1974), Henri Lefebvre analyses how different cultures have used and modified space according to specific historical moments and political dominances. From this analysis it is possible to infer how political systems have used space and architecture to show power, exclude minorities, divide people according to their religion, social or economic condition and perpetuate the status quo in their favour. On the other hand, this analysis illustrates that space can be also an element of power for excluded people and minorities; in the form of resistance. In this case, individuals reposition themselves in order to propose alternative ways of producing space; with both individual and collective benefices (Boano & Kelling, 2013).
Under the notion of space as an active dimension, Lefebvre situates the *perceived and lived* over the *conceived* because those categories represent everyday life and are dimensions where alternative ways of production of space can take place (Lefebvre, 1974; Merrifield, 2000). The best examples of everyday life, and therefore the best examples of alternative ways of producing space, are represented in the construction of informal areas in the contemporary cities of the global south. Informality, and the spaces within it, are opposed to the abstract space of 'experts' and can therefore be used as the *starting point for the realisation of the possible* (Lefebvre, 1974; Müller, 2008). Moreover, informality is one of the ways in which individuals have contested the conditions imposed by the ‘formal or legal’ city and have created spaces under their own rules according to their *perceived and lived* conception of space. In other words, the informal parts of cities are spaces of disruption where social practices can be used by those excluded from the processes of producing space to reclaim their voice. In brief, space is a social product in which all the dualities are included, planned and non-planned, formal and informal, the rich and the poor; consequently, its production allows for all the members of society to be involved in the process (Lefebvre, 1974; Till, 2011).

**Space, inequality and poverty**

When considering that the production of space is a social construction, it is necessary to define which political, economic and social factors influence the production of contemporary cities and specifically the cities in the global south, where alternative ways of producing space are plausible and urgent. Currently, the social process of producing space is not based on the idea of improving the well-being of the population but on parameters of capitalism and consumption (Harvey, 2014). Under this logic it is possible to infer that scarcity is socially created by the capitalist system to generate wealth and poverty (Till, 2011). In fact, both are generated by the same processes and their key determinant factors are imbalanced social structures and institutions (Clark, 2002; Till, 2011). In this context, where scarcity is intentionally constructed, urban space is seen as a commodity or financial asset and the concept of private property generates social exclusion and deprives the poor of a place in the city (Clark, 2002; Merrifield, 2014). Moreover, the social order imposed by capitalism has been legitimised by the emulation of patterns of collective consumption by the whole society and governments are more concerned with supporting the free market or are themselves representatives of this sector (Merrifield, 2014). As a result, the current
conditions of producing space allow the wealthy to become even richer while the crisis for the masses is progressively worsened (Harvey, 2014).

The consequences of capitalism materialise all over the world in the contrasting urban landscapes shaped by exclusive developments and constructed by the private sector and self-build slums. In opposition to this imbalanced reality, small scale actions from organised groups of activists or excluded groups dissatisfied with the ruling regime of capital accumulation are trying to find ways to disrupt the status quo (Merrifield, 2012; Harvey, 2014). Nevertheless, many of these initiatives have been ineffective because in their approaches, scarcity is seen as an insufficiency of resources and not as a social construction (Till, 2011). This vision may have problematic results because it just focuses on the provision of objects or physical outcomes that are not embedded in the social reality that produces scarcity. On the other hand, other social movements have found room to manoeuvre the conditions of an engaged production of objects under political principles that challenge the ruling capitalist system (ibid.). All in all, the most effective way for addressing a context defined by scarcity is with intentional acts and forms of dissensus (Rancière, 1999; Till, 2011) that offer alternatives to face the pressure of power structures that try to perpetuate the current circumstances in their favour.

1.2 Architecture and politics

Post-political reality according to Rancière

The contemporary cities dominated by capitalism live under what Rancière calls a post-political ideology. This period started with the rise of capitalist systems, particularly neoliberalism (the end of the politics), applied in several countries around the world as an answer to the failed implementations of other political systems such as socialism, fascism and communism. The political disorientation produced by these unsuccessful schemes of government, and the conditions imposed by the free market, led academics and artists to reject political reflections and leave the conscientious design and production of space to mere bureaucratic administrators and technocrats (Rancière, 1999; Lahiji, 2011). Consequently, it is possible to say that currently the production of space is developed under a depoliticised process conducted by representatives of the free market and ‘apolitical’ professionals that are perpetuating the unequal living conditions of the cities, supporting the economic systems that increase the gap between the rich and the poor and giving more power to the dominant classes. Nevertheless, this
process of production and the actors involved in it are never completely apolitical because the space itself is a political element (Rancière, 1999).

In the specific case of architects, one group claims to develop their practice under a politically neutral position and improve the living conditions of society only through technique and expertise (Till, 1998). In this case, according to Giancarlo De Carlo, architects focus their attention in the problems of 'how' instead of concentrating their efforts in defining the 'why' (Bouman & Van Toorn, 1994). This kind of practices disguises the reality and hides the origin of the conflicts inherited in the processes of production of space (Till, 1998). Moreover, schools of architecture base the educational process on the production of radically different objects; however, these objects are always produced under the same traditional logic. Architectural schools confuse radical making with radical thinking; thus, the status quo remains untouched (Till, 2009). Based on these facts, a large portion of the society sees architects as irresponsible and arrogant actors that produce physical interventions in the urban environment under undemocratic processes that ignore the real needs of the people.

In opposition to this way of 'conventional architecture', other group of professionals prefer working under different models of practice such as, 'community architecture'. Several authors that support this model suggest that architects must be divested of their power and all the decisions related to the production of space must be made exclusively by community members in a 'real' democratic process. In fact, the role of architects in this context is limited to technical and aesthetic advisors (Till, 1998). Community architecture practices see any act of interpretation or initiative performed by the architects as an imposition that must be avoided in order to continue with the 'democratic' process. In brief, this approach represents an extreme in which knowledge is only associated with repressive tendencies of power and not with its transformative power (ibid.).

Furthermore, one of the main problems faced by the urban poor is the denial of recognition by the formal cities that try to ignore their existence and reject their social practices, only giving importance to the conceived dimension of space. Rancière criticised the intellectual superiority attitude of the philosophers that try to interpret the voice of the marginalised rather than listen to them (Rancière, 1999; Boano & Kelling, 2013). He states that politics can be understood through two concepts; the first
one is that of ‘fake politics’ or \textit{politics of the police} order and the second one is ‘real politics’ or \textit{politics of disruption} or \textit{dissensus}. On the one hand, \textit{police} is not related to repressive forces but to a specific order of things and individuals. This \textit{police} order determines the functions that must be performed by the members of the society and the places designated for those functions. This logic includes informal settlements and marginal areas by their exclusion of what is consider the 'formal' city; in other words, the existence of relegated areas in cities defined by the \textit{police}. On the other hand, politics of \textit{disruption} or \textit{dissensus} refers to the antagonistic forces or actions that interrupt the 'proper' order of things established by the \textit{police} (Porter, 2007; Boano & Kelling, 2013). Lahiji (2011) explains Rancière's theory by presenting politics as an anarchical process that confronts the logic of the disagreement to the logic of the \textit{police} with an emancipatory aim. Moreover, he states that politics is inherited in any act of \textit{subjectivization} that recalibrates the natural order of bodies in the name of equality, which is called \textit{Distribution of the sensible} (Lahiji, 2011). This explanation suggests that architects can be part of this anarchical process as political subjects that look at spaces to disrupt the established order. In fact, the concept elaborated by Rancière (1999) about the \textit{Distribution of the sensible} gives architects parameters to rethink their role in producing space and sees architecture as a political endeavour, able to deal with the consequences of scarcity created by the contemporary societies.

\textbf{Space, politics and aesthetics}

For Rancière it is impossible to discuss politics and aesthetics independently because there is politics in aesthetics and aesthetics is politics. In fact, aesthetics and politics are two forms of \textit{dissensus} that in their own way put in action the \textit{distribution of the sensible} (Lahiji, 2011). Moreover, he argues that art and other aesthetic practices like architecture, are always political and play a fundamental role in the \textit{distribution of the sensible} because it is the aesthetics the one that determines who has a voice. The materiality of the space and its aesthetics can be seen and judged, opening a discussion around ways of producing space. However, the important aspect of this discussion is not finding a new spatial order but defining who can and who cannot participate in the production of space (Porter, 2007; Boano & Kelling, 2013). The theory of \textit{distribution of the sensitive} suggested by Rancière determines a process of producing space that articulates forms of action, production, perception and thought, which is related to Lefebvre’s concept of space as something \textit{lived}, \textit{perceived} and \textit{conceived} (1974). These two visions can be used to determine parameters to define if a built environment
perpetuates an established aesthetic system or disrupts it by applying the concept of politics stated by Rancière (1999).

Historically, the architectural discipline has demonstrated a great interest in aesthetics and consequently in politics. In fact, this interest was the base of the political discourse of ‘Modernity’ and is currently the most stimulating reflection and thought in contemporary radical philosophy (Lahiji, 2011) Consequently, by taking into consideration the deeply political character of the space, architects should adopt a political position and act as political subjects; and not as accidental allies of the imperative neoliberal post-political ideology (ibid.). Boano and Kelling (2013) reflect on Rancière’s statements and suggest that it is essential a theoretical reconfiguration of design and architecture that makes evident their impurity and non-neutrality. Additionally, this reconfiguration will expose the political nature of participation and the lines of power and agency required for the use of politics as a way of disruption or dissensus in the current ways of producing space (Boano & Kelling, 2013).

Political subjectivization of architecture

On the one hand, architects are blamed for causing social breakdown after the unsuccessful attempts of some architectural movements, like the Modernist, to establish new ways of producing space. Even though those proposals demonstrated a high level of political commitment and a deep intention to disrupt the instituted police of the time, they were based on large master plans that ignored the everyday life of the users and only emphasised the conceived dimension of space (Till, 1998) (Lahiji, 2011). On the other hand, the apolitical attitude of architects in the production of space has presented them as evil characters associated with political corruption, which has been used by some academics to suggest that architects should be no more than stylistic and technical facilitators (Till, 1998). Consequently, past failed actions proposed by architectural movements and the present political neutrality assumed by architects have demoted the profession and positioned architects in a limbo state, where their role is undefined or permanently criticised. As it was mention before, it is fundamental to make a theoretical reconfiguration of architecture and design that disrupts the dominant process producing space. This disruption must challenge the political order (police) using the politics and the aesthetics to reinvent the role of the excluded in order to ascribe them a voice and reimagine the role of architects as political subjects (Lahiji, 2011; Boano & Kelling, 2013).
Political *subjectivization* can be understood as a process in which individuals act in the name of equality to re-imagine the position of the excluded and marginalised. Furthermore, a political subject is an outsiders or an in–between that acts in the gap between two identities (Paulin, 2007). Based on these affirmations, the reconfiguration of the profession should position architects as political subjects acting in favour of the *redistribution of the sensible* and recalibrating architecture as a *dispositif* or *apparatus* for alternative ways of producing space (Lahiji, 2011; Boano & Kelling, 2013). Foucault's idea of *apparatus or dispositif* is not only represented in groups of heterogeneous elements, but mainly in the network of relations between them (Deleuze, 1991). Furthermore, in his book *What is an Apparatus?*, Giorgio Agamben expands on Foucault's concept stating: “I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gesture, behaviour, opinions or discourse of living beings” (Agamben, 2000, cited in Lahiji, 2011). In this sense, the mentioned recalibration of architecture involves rethinking the position of each element and the strategic use of the discipline to articulate them. Complementary, architecture, politics and aesthetics, based on Rancière’s theory of the *distribution of the sensible*, can be used as lenses to analyse the case studies and determine the influence of architects as political subjects in the production of space and the possible impact of architectonic products in dealing with urban inequality and poverty.

The following diagram (Fig. 1) summarises the connection between different concepts analysed in the literature review and how the build a wider understanding of space and architecture as highly political elements.
Fig. 1 Theorisation Diagram (2014)

1 Author's own image.
1.3 Lenses to identify disruptive praxis

The theories of the authors analysed above are adopted to construct an idea of how the contemporary cities are produced and the factors which influence this process of production. Concepts extracted from Lefebvre's work establish space as a social product in different dimensions. Other authors' theories complement this idea showing the consequences of producing space under the capitalist ideology, such as the social construction of scarcity and the use of space as a tool for control and exclusion. Moreover, by using these theories to understand the context in which processes of social production of space take place, it is possible to identify the spaces in which changes can be proposed through intentional acts that disrupt the status quo and generate alternative ways of producing space.

Additionally, the literature review presents an idea of the role adopted by architects in the current system of producing space and several concepts suggesting that architects should rethink their praxis. Finally, as part of this recalibration of the profession, the concept of *apparatus* suggested by Foucault and Agamben offers a perspective that can be used to reveal the real political potential of architecture. Therefore, in order to get a better understanding of the use of architecture as a political endeavour to deal with poverty and inequality, several lenses have been developed, based on the theoretical exploration above. These lenses are grouped into three categories that shape the analytical framework that recognises the architects as political subjects and the impact of this role in the construction of alternative ways of producing space.

**Political attitude**

This category is built over the theories that highlight the political essence of architecture and space. Under this lens it is possible to determine the level of engagement of architects and how they use and support intentional acts in order to challenge the *police* or defined order of things. Furthermore, this category argues for architects to use their praxis to build new disruptive processes of producing space that tackle situations of inequality, injustice and exclusion instead of addressing the scarcity faced by modern societies only through the provision of objects. In brief, this category analyses the political attitude of architects and how they accept their responsibility and political role in the process of producing space.
**Use of Aesthetics as Politics**

This lens uses Rancière's conception of aesthetics as politics to analyse the process of design and production of space applied through alternative praxes. In fact, the attention is focused on the emancipatory and democratic aim of the use of aesthetics in the case studies. In this sense, it is essential to understand how aesthetics determines who has a voice in the production of space in a specific context and the strategies used by the architects engaged in the process to involve the marginalised groups. This category identifies a necessary critical awareness of architects in order to not reproduce solutions as recipes. In fact, this analysis looks for unique operations that perturb the existing order of things through the concept of the *distribution of sensible*.

**Role in large scale processes of disruption**

The theories grouped under this category suggest the possibility of combining different approaches of producing space in order to create a big scale process of disruption. This lens examines how each individual intervention can be seen as a starting point for larger processes of disruption or challenge to the *police* order. Moreover, this category emphasises the concept of producing space as a permanent feedback process shaped by diverse actors. Therefore, it looks at the political *subjectivization* of architecture as a way of co-producing knowledge. The co-production of knowledge brings new theory under the opinion of several actors, reinforcing the permanent challenge of the status quo. Lastly, the inclusion of academia as another actor in this process is fundamental under this lens because it allows for future larger changes in the way of praxis.

The three lenses build over the concepts found in the literature review and their relation with the space in which architects act. These lenses are summarised in the following diagram (Fig. 2).
Fig. 2 Lenses to recognise the action of architects as political objects (2014)².

² Author’s own image.
This chapter presents the praxis of two architectural offices and uses the lenses presented in the last section to identify in their projects the political actions that disrupt the status quo in each context.
2.1 Lessons from Quito

Latin America is one of the regions that embraced the Modernist utopia with more progressive and original concepts. This region not only followed the architectonic tendency that changed the nature of cities around the world but also created its own version of Modernism based on a set of regional conditions (Fabricius, 2011). Despite this, the model failed, which meant that Latin American cities had to pay the price of the unsuccessful utopia as many other cities around the world. During the postmodern era, most of the cities in Latin America were under the effects of rapid urbanisation, dictatorship regimes, violence and political instability (ibid.). In fact, during this period, Ecuador experienced a deep economic and political crisis that resulted in the creation of cities with high levels of inequality and poverty. The percentage of informal areas with lack of basic infrastructure and services were unprecedented. Moreover, these areas are a clear reflection of the social issues built by the dominant powers and legitimised by the society. During a long period of time the governments tried to fight against informality by destroying this communities or simply neglecting the informal areas.

The strategies to address informality that have been implemented more recently have shifted away from massive clearance of slums and relocation of communities that caused considerable social disruption (Beardsley & Werthmann, 2008). The restoration of civilian rule, the opposition to market-based policies by small political movements and the rise of populist governments have moved the poor to the head of the political

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agenda in Latin America (Ibid.) (Fabricius, 2011). Moreover, the strong involvement of governments and the presence of charismatic leaders have redefined the priorities in these cities and encouraged professional to work hand to hand with residents of informal settlements. In the specific case of Ecuador, both local and national government have implemented a set of actions to improve the living conditions in the informal settlements. On the one hand, the municipalities have worked during the last years with organised communities of informal settlements to improve the access to infrastructure and services in order to legalise them. On the other hand, the central government is providing loans for the people to build new housing projects or upgrade the existing settlements. These actions have transformed the work in informal areas into a mainstream practice, which has become a new opportunity for the free market to reproduce patterns of collective consumption.

In this context, in which the improvement of urban conditions is fundamental, architects in Ecuador have to decide if their praxis will support the existing ways of producing space, and therefore, perpetuate the inequality and poverty produced by the ruling system or if they will find methods to challenge the status quo and recalibrate architecture as a political endeavour. The work of Al Borde, an architectural studio based on Quito, follows the second alternative.

Al Borde Arquitectos

Al Borde is a collaborative and experimental architecture studio that aims to solve real needs based on the available social or physical resources (Al Borde Arquitectos, n.d.). The architects that are part of the studio have recognised that not only their actions as architects influence the space but also their actions as citizens. Therefore, their praxis is based in a permanent learning process that looks to problematize each project in order to build a critical thinking to face different situations (Durán, 2010). In fact, the projects themselves, through the process of construction and the use of the people, are the factors that have shaped the vision of the study. Despite their link with academia and the action of other professionals, Al Borde does not try to follow or create any architectonic tendency.
According to the interview reported in Harvard Design Magazine (2012), currently the attention of the studio is focused on three areas of action:

- **Development projects:** Since 2007, Al Borde has been responsible for the design of several projects under different areas of interest and with the collaboration of multiple actors. Nevertheless, their work in the field of development is summarized in the project *Las Tres Esperanzas*[^5]; a school built in three stages, *Nueva Esperanza, Esperanza 2* and *Ultima Esperanza*. This project is the space in which Al Borde and the community involved test their ideas about self-construction, participatory processes, construction with vernacular materials and techniques, low cost construction among others. From this process the architects learned that the design stage is not the most important factor in the production of space but the social effects around the process of production of the architectonic objects.

- **Interventions in public space:** After the failed attempt at working in collaboration with the Municipality of Quito in the construction of public spaces,
Al Borde is looking for places in marginalised areas of the city to intervene through participatory processes (Colectivos de Arquitectura Latino América, 2011). The aim of these projects is to experiment with new conceptions of public space without the restrictions imposed by the bureaucratic municipal system. Additionally, they have intervened in public spaces with projects designed in collaboration with artists and cultural entities.

- **Rethink the informality - Insurgent citizenship:** In this category the studio developed *Desborde* ⁶, a project that uses small urban interventions aiming to create a sense of citizenship and public awareness about specific social issues that affect the contemporary cities.

**Political attitude**

The projects of Al Borde challenge the defined order, or *police*, in many different ways. According to the context and the actors involved in the projects, some of them show a stronger political attitude than others; however, all aim to use architecture as a political endeavour to tackle social issues produced by the contemporary society and reflected in the cities of Latin America. Some interventions such as *Cartas de Mujeres* ⁷ or *Vagón del Saber* ⁸ rethink the importance of public spaces in the city and use them to expose situations of inequality and injustice. Moreover, the intervened spaces open a new arena to include society’s marginalised groups. In other cases the attention of the studio is focused on the process of producing space and not in the physical outcome resulting from this process. For instance, the interventions developed in Puerto Cabuyal, a small community in the Ecuadorian coast, use intentional acts of *dissensus or disruption* against the existing processes of producing space. These actions confront the social production of space by proposing new power relations between the actors of the society, alternative roles for architects in this process, a reconfiguration of academia as a more proactive and engaged actor, and unconventional options to tackle the scarcity created by the economic system ruling in Ecuador. Lastly, *Desborde* (Fig. 5) and other initiatives of the studio take their political attitude to a limit in which the architects become activists that support insurgent acts of the citizenship.

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⁷ More information about Cartas de Mujeres available at: http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=175.
Use of aesthetics as politics

Even though the political attitude of these architects clearly perturbs the existing order of the things; Rancière's concept of aesthetics and politics is not fully applied in their projects because they make visible the situations of inequality and marginalisation but do not always adopt emancipatory or democratic processes to address them. For instance, the project *Cartas de Mujeres* (Fig. 6) was developed in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental institutions and aimed to expose gender-related issues in public spaces. This initiative uncovered violent and discriminatory situations against women, created new spaces in the city to express their position and opened a discussion about a fundamental social problem; however, the process did not produce a long term impact or change in the status quo.

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9 Image taken from: http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=166.
As it was stated before, Al Borde’s work is based on a continuous process of self-critique and learning. Because of this, they continue looking for alternative ways of producing space that involves the participation of other actors. This exploration of new approaches can be seen in the workshop Taller Particular 11 de Mayo developed with students of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE) and people of the neighbourhood 11 de Mayo. The process included exercises of participation, guided by an anthropologist, in which students and members of the community discussed the needs of the area, potential materials to build the projects, available physical and social resources and the importance of the participation of the members of the community in every stage of the process (Al Borde Arquitectos, 2010). Despite the set of operations developed during the workshop included the say of the community members; the people were actively involved only during the process of construction. In other words, these operations supported a political subjectivization of the architecture and a process of redistribution of the sensible but did not include marginalised groups in the discussion around the aesthetic part of the physical outcomes. In fact, in this discussion the architects did not listen but instead interpreted the voice of the people, giving more importance to the conceived dimension of the space than to the other two elements of Lefebvre’s triad.

Finally, the work implemented for Las Tres Esperanzas project illustrates how the action of the studio has evolved during the last years. Each intervention developed with this
community is an essential step forward in the exploration of the studio’s praxis to achieve an emancipatory and democratic process for the production of space. During the first intervention (Fig. 7), in 2009, the architects of Al Borde developed a deep investigation on materials, budget, geometry and shape in order to build *Nueva Esperanza* school (Al Borde Arquitectos, n.d.). The construction was done through a collaborative process between members of the community and volunteers. Nevertheless, the only person of the community who gave his opinion during the design process was the teacher in charge of the school (ibid.) (Al Borde, 2014). In this intervention the *conceived* space has priority over the *perceived and lived*; however, once the kids modified the space through everyday practices and use, the project acted as a catalyst to improving the living conditions of the area and encouraged the members of the community to work together in other projects.

![Fig. 7 Nueva Esperanza Project, Puerto Cabuyal – Ecuador. (Al Borde, 2009) 12](Image)

En la intervención de *Esperanza 2* (Fig. 8), la segunda intervención en el mismo área, involucró a los residentes no solo en el proceso de construcción sino también en el diseño del programa y uso del espacio. En este caso, las *conceived and perceived* dimensiones del espacio fueron las más relevantes e influyentes en la construcción de una zona multiusos donde actividades de diferentes grupos de personas pueden tener lugar (Al Borde, 2014). La long term engagement of the architects with this community allowed them to have a permanent feedback of the impact of the interventions and rethink the role they should adopt in this process.

12 Image taken from: [http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=21](http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=21).
These reflections were the starting point for the more recent intervention developed by Al Borde in Puerto Cabuyal, *Ultima Esperanza* (Fig. 9), a series of workshops in which the community members and the architects work together to design new projects for the community (ibid.). The aim of these workshops is not only to design future interventions for the area but also to strengthen the process of production of space built in the past years. Moreover, the activities develop with the community increase the capacity of agency of its members and complement the skills and knowledge acquired in previous interventions. In other words, this intervention exposes the political nature of participation and explores the possibility of the use of architecture as an *apparatus or dispositive* that acts in favour of the *distribution of the sensitive*.

**Fig. 9** Ultima Esperanza Project, Puerto Cabuyal – Ecuador. (Al Borde, 2013)

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14 Image taken from: http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=223.
Role in large scale processes of disruption

The work of Al Borde links its actions with academia and the work of other professionals in order to increase the impact of their interventions. They recognise the power of alliances and participatory processes to scale the impact of their proposals and truly modify the order of the things.

In the case of academia, the projects developed with the architecture schools try to expose students to real social problems and present alternative ways of practice for the future. Moreover, the students develop a critical thinking that allows the creation of innovative architectonic objects but, more importantly, it opens a discussion around the social and political reality in which these objects are embedded. For instance, in the project *Taller Particular 11 de Mayo* (Fig. 10), the students analysed not only the spatial consequences of their interventions but also their social impact and the political reaction of the actors involved in the process. Additionally, by being part of international workshops and giving lectures in universities the studio creates links with other initiatives in Latin America. These connections enrich the process of co-production of knowledge and multiply the possible entry points for disruptive actions. All in all, the network built through academia is used by Al Borde to create a larger process of disruption that includes new actors and more radical actions with long term effects.

![Fig. 10 Casa Comunal 11 de Mayo, Quito – Ecuador. (Al Borde, 2010)](image)

15 Image taken from: http://www.ecuadorgbc.org/curso4.html#.
Al Borde also uses other strategies to show its political position and generate larger processes of disruption. On the one hand, the studio designs projects such as Pabellón 12 Puertas, Fiesta de la Cultura, Al Ocio Socio or Espacio de Exploración Teatral (Fig. 11) to intervene in Quito’s public spaces and observe the reaction of citizens to these alternative uses of the space, incorporation of new functions and use of materials in unusual ways to solve everyday issues. On the other hand, the architects of Al Borde organise informal discussions and campaigns about different social situations that they consider relevant in the process of producing space (Al Borde Arquitectos, n.d.). Through these processes, the architecture office reflects on their own praxis, opens the discussion to public opinion and incentivises other professionals involved in the process of producing space to rethink their role and level of engagement.

![Fig. 11 Espacio de Exploración Teatral, Mobile Space Ecuador. (Al Borde, 2013)](http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=24)

20 Image taken from: http://www.albordearq.com/cgi/wd/?pg=24
2.2 Lessons from Bangkok

![Location map of Bangkok, Thailand](http://inciclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Archivo:Mapamundi.png)

The 11 countries that shape South-East Asia have lived through very dramatic processes of political development. These processes include both authoritarian and democratic governments, military rebellions, managed elections and struggles for autonomy from the domination of other countries (Hirschman & Edwards, 2007). Despite this, South-East Asia has been one of the most economically active regions in the Global South. This fact is more evident in some countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines and Brunei, where the economic growth has brought effects of western developed societies (ibid.). In the specific case of Thailand, the economic development registered from 1960 to 1990 reflects the rapid process of urbanisation and the modernisation of the provincial cities, especially Bangkok, have attracted migrants looking for social and economic opportunities (Nathalang, 2000). Consequently, the cities are made up of a wide range of cultural backgrounds and the rural areas surrounding the city have been developed into industrial plants and mainstream projects for business centres and housing (ibid.).

During 1970s and 1980s, the consequences of the rapid economic growth in the Thai context triggered the formation of groups of community architects based on principles of political activism (Luansang et al., 2012). Even though the action of the community architects has now changed since then, these movements continue working with the

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communities to deal with issues related to physical infrastructure, massive evictions and housing upgrading. This long term relation between community architects and marginalised communities has opened spaces for negotiation with the government in order to deal with informal settlements in the city. In fact, the action of NGOs, such as the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR)\textsuperscript{22}, has determined the context of Thailand and offer architects new spaces of action and praxis.

Currently, the major focus of ACHR’s works in Thailand is the implementation of the Asian Coalition for Community Action programme (ACCA)\textsuperscript{23} and the Baan Mankong programme, which aim to support the processes of upgrading of informal settlements by opening up new spaces of collaboration, mobilising people to generate large scale changes and offering new options as solutions to solve old problems (ACHR, 2010; Luansang et al., 2012; ACHR, 2013). Nevertheless, the Baan Mankong has been particularly effective due to the fact that it is coordinated, promoted and financed by the Community Organisations Development Institute (CODI). This national institution is an example of a people-centred process of development implemented by the government in order to deal with the problems of urban poverty in the country. The engagement of the actors in the social environment defined by the Buddhist ethics opens the opportunity for alternative methods of constructions of cities out of the pro-market ideologies.

\textbf{Openspace}

Openspace is a Bangkok based architecture office focused on working with communities through participatory processes and open to interdisciplinary collaboration (Openspace, n.d.). The architects who work in this studio have being involved in the ACCA program, collaboration with various marginalised communities in Bangkok as well as South-East Asian cities (Luansang et al., 2012; ACHR, 2013). Based on this experience, the work of the studio focuses on the agency of change of the excluded. Currently their projects, both in Bangkok and in other provinces of Thailand, use different strategies to encourage people in the communities to be part of the process and use participation as a tool to develop a large variety of interventions such us, community-driven masterplans, rehabilitation of public spaces or universal design for disabled. For the studio the participation of the community is fundamental; consequently, the architects dedicate

\textsuperscript{22} More information about ACHR available at: http://www.achr.net/.
\textsuperscript{23} More information about ACHR available at: http://www.achr.net/activities-acca.php.
more time to this stage of their projects. In fact, for Openspace the main goal behind the participatory processes is not to build with the community a new architectural project but to use the process of design and construction as an opportunity to work through their strengths and improve their weaknesses.

Fig. 13 Factors influencing the production of space in Bangkok

Openspace uses different strategies to approach communities depending on the aim of each intervention and the issue that this specific intervention will address. The following points are based on the documentation of the proposal for ‘1 House = 1000 Homes’ by Openspace:

- **Community Consultation**: this process is applied in the early stages of every project to identify the leaders and more influential actors in the community. Those community members represent a key element for further work in the area and are the main connection with the rest of the community.

- **Setting the Brief**: For the studio this step allows community members to identify their needs and find their own solutions. Furthermore, this stage sets priorities amongst the interventions and allows for the re-evaluation of the project throughout its implementation.

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24 Author’s own image.
- **Negotiation:** Openspace has a clear understanding of the importance of the power relations in the projects of development. Therefore, participatory process are used to established new connections with the authorities and the land owners in order to obtain permissions, build agreements and plan future interventions.

- **Mapping:** This process gives the architects the necessary information regarding both physical and social aspects, to identify the issues that should be tackled, the available resources and the potential risks faced by the community.

- **Participatory design:** For the architects of Openspace, this stage of the process gives them the opportunity to discuss the needs and aspirations of the people. During this process the residents reveal where the problems in the community are by identifying the active members, the excluded groups and the different expectations and priorities between these individuals. Finally, the participatory design process is a way of constructing new knowledge since it includes the spatial ideas of all the actors and not only those proposed by the architects.

- **Technical consultation:** This stage is complementary to the design process and encourages community members and professionals to share their knowledge about materials, constructive systems and other skills. Additionally, this step is used by the studio to build over the existing skills of the community members.

- **Planning:** Openspace understands the importance of coordinating and organising the work each stakeholders. Moreover, this process allows the studio to manage the expectations of each actor and determines their role in subsequent stages.

- **Construction:** The construction stage as in any other 'traditional' project is full of unexpected issues; therefore, it is fundamental for the community to be able to work together and make decisions based on their priorities and the available resources.

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** this is an important process for both the architectural studio and the community itself because it allows for the
evaluation of the impact of the project in the community. Moreover, it opens the possibility for improvement and to complement it with other actions.

Openspace shows its political attitude, contribution to the *distribution of the sensible* and aim to support larger disruptive process by using the political nature of participation and the power of agency in every project.

**Political attitude**

The work of Openspace shows a clear political *subjectivization* of architecture because their praxis does not pursue to intervene in the built environment but challenges the preconceived uses of space and the process of its production. Moreover, since the architects of the studio have been themselves community architects, every project of the studio uses participatory processes as the main tool of disruption and recalibration of the profession.

The variety of the projects implemented by the studio is a clear example of their political commitment and their understanding of space as a highly political element. Some of their interventions support existing disruptive actions carried out by NGOs, governmental institutions and organised communities. The most relevant example of this is the collaborative work developed with ACHR through the ACCA program. These processes show poor families who are involved in the program different options for specific upgrading interventions, such as low-cost furniture for the elderly and accessible routes for the disabled (ACHR, 2013). Moreover, the project *On common ground*[^25], developed with architecture students and members of 9 communities in Bangkok, reflects on the used leftover spaces of the city and through the interventions legitimises the unheard possibilities of producing space (Openspace, n.d.).

In other cases, the projects of the studio require looking for new entry points to generate alternative ways of producing space. These types of projects require rethinking the use of the spaces and adopting long-term participatory strategies in order to challenge the *police*. For instances, the development of the *Klong Toey Community Lantern Project*[^26] (Fig. 14), allocated in the largest and oldest slum of Bangkok,

[^26]: More information about *Klong Toey Community Lantern* Available at: [http://weklongtoey.blogspot.co.uk/](http://weklongtoey.blogspot.co.uk/).
challenged the dominant perspective of the use of public spaces by proposing a playground that acts as catalyst to improve the living conditions of the kids in the area (The Decorators, 2013; Arkitecur, 2011). In fact, this project not only represents a physical improvement in the area but also a tool to show people its impact on the surrounding environment and the possibility of future interventions.

Fig. 14 Klong Toey Community Lantern Project, Bangkok –Thailand. (Tyin Tegnestue, 2011)\textsuperscript{27}

**Use of aesthetics as politics**

As it was mentioned before, Openspace uses participatory process as its most powerful strategy to act in the name of equality and in favour of the *distribution of the sensible*. Nevertheless, implementing participatory processes in a context like Bangkok, a city full of actors with different agendas, is not always an easy task for this architectural office. They have to use a large range of activities to approach the communities in order to deal with problems of mistrust and disappointment amongst the community members. In the case of *Klong Toey Community Lantern Project*, the intervention started with a month-long on-site research (Fig. 15), followed by small upgrading interventions with immediate effects on the physical environment and other activities, such as the projection of movies, to attract the attention of the people in the settlement (Tyin Tegnestue Architects, 2011; The Decorators, 2013).

\textsuperscript{27} Images taken from: http://2011.arkitektur.no/slum-upgrading1.
The process was complicated and disappointing for the architects because the community did not show interest in changing the conditions of the area (The Decorators, 2013). In despite of this, they continued working in the place for one year and finally discovered that the kids were the most actively engaged actors of the community (Openspace, 2014). In collaboration with the Norwegian studio Tyin Tegnestue and students from local and international universities they worked with the children of the community for the design, planning and construction of the intervention (Tyin Tegnestue Architects, 2011). The work developed with this particular marginalised group contributes to the distribution of the sensible by allowing the children to reclaim a voice in the process of producing space. Moreover, when the adults of the community finally decided to be part of the process, the project received extra feedback and opened a discussion about the use of space and the implications of its construction.

Klong Toey is not the only case in which the architects of Openspace focus their attention in the most marginalised and excluded groups of the communities. For instance, in the interventions developed in Klong 3 (Fig. 16) the studio developed a series of participatory activities that highlight the importance of spaces and furniture for the children and the elderly (Openspace, 2014). By including these groups in the process of production of space, the studio prioritised to the perceived and conceived dimensions of space and created objects that actually improve the interaction of these individuals with the space and with other members of the community.

28 Image taken from: http://weklongtoey.blogspot.co.uk/.
Finally, the work developed with poor families in the remote villages of Thailand has opened a discussion about the importance of thinking beyond the pre-established conceptions of participation. In these projects, the architects adapted the houses of the families with handicapped members using low-cost furniture built with local available materials (ACHR, 2013). During the process of design and construction, they explored various options that would make the daily activities of these individuals easier, and to increase their level of independence in the everyday life. Currently, the studio is encouraging nursing students of Khon Kean University to be part of this project to include more ideas about handicapped-friendly spaces from a different perspective (ibid.). These interventions in the settlement bring together the three dimensions of space stated by Lefebvre and use architecture as a political endeavour that make visible a previously ignore reality, determines who has a voice in the process through the use of aesthetics and reconfigures the established order or police to include new actors and operations.

Clearly, the projects of Openspace contribute to the distribution of sensible by disrupting the ‘proper’ order of things through participation and the reconfiguration of the social production of the space. Nonetheless, the interventions have been implemented recently, so their real impacts on the community, both physical and social, are not yet evident. Therefore, it is necessary to include a self-critique process that allows the permanent improvement of the interventions and ensures a real change in the status quo.

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Role in large scale processes of disruption

Openspace supports large scale processes of disruption not only because of the inclusion of multiple actors in the development of their projects, but also because of the radically new ways of addressing the problems faced by the communities of Bangkok.

The studio exposes the reality of the informal settlements and the options of the architects to work in this specific context in a completely different way. Their interventions generate a larger process of disruption because they force the other actors involved to rethink their own role and the current effect of their political actions. With regards to architectural students, they visualised different options of practice for the future and start to ground their ideas in the reality they experienced. On the other hand, having connection with international NGOs allows them to work in other countries in the region and keep learning from their experiences. At the same time, they are showing these organizations the various options for new ways to approach the production of space based on the same people-centred philosophy. This approach looks beyond the preconceived uses and focuses its attention on the social processes that define its use. Finally, their proposals address problems that have not been discussed before and make architects rethink the focus of their interventions and the importance of actually listening and not interpreting the voice of the people in order to build a larger process of dissensus.

![Fig. 17 Communitarian Furniture Project, Bangkok –Thailand. (Openspace, 2011)](https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.427108930641934.106758.222418051111024&type=3)

2.3 Different contexts same principles

The analysis of these two case studies has demonstrated the potential use of architecture as a political endeavour to deal with urban inequality and poverty.

In the case of Al Borde, the conditions that influence the production of space in Quito have forced them to adopt a stronger confrontational attitude whereas the action of Openspace in Bangkok is more pacific and has managed to find room in the existing initiatives to propose new ideas. Even when both studios use different processes to develop their projects and the physical outputs are also radically different, their work reflects a deep political attitude and disrupt the established modes of producing space. Moreover, the use of aesthetics as politics is another factor that needs to be applied according to the context and the actors that shape it. In fact, the cases make evident the various approaches that can be used by architects to include marginalised groups in the discussion of aesthetics. On the one hand, the Thai context allows architects to develop a connection with organised communities that is reinforced with the action of governmental and non-governmental institutions. Additionally, these alliances with other actors open the opportunity of scaling up and institutionalising the people-centred proposals of Openspace. On the other hand, Al Borde acts in a context in which the role of architects is limited to the design and detailing of buildings, denying the dependency of the profession in other factors. Based on this, the Ecuadorian studio has explored various approaches in order to build democratic processes that include marginalised groups and use aesthetics to contribute to the distribution of the sensible. All in all, by comparing the lessons learnt from Quito and Bangkok, it is possible to infer that architects can tackle urban inequality and poverty in different contexts using different strategies but basing their praxis on the same principles of disruption.
Chapter 3: Conclusion
Since space is both a physical and a social manifestation of society, then it is inevitable to have scarcity, inequality and exclusion in the building environment (Till, 2011). In fact, the political and economic systems, influencing the construction of contemporary cities, intentionally produce these conditions in order to benefit themselves and reinforce the bases of the free market (Clark, 2002; Till, 2011; Harvey, 2014). Consequently, individuals have been forced to find means to escape from that condition by creating processes that challenge the status quo and generate alternative ways of producing space. This discussion around the process of production of space has also raised reflections about the current role of the architects in this process, and whether their actions support or resist the previously mentioned conditions.

This dissertation built over concepts of different authors that highlight the political nature of space and architecture in order to define how architecture can be used as a political endeavour to deal with urban inequality and poverty. In order to answer this question, Ranciere’s concepts of dissensus, aesthetics and distribution of the sensible were used to create different lenses to identify the actions that transform architects into political subjects that use architecture in the name of equality. These three lenses established that in order to deal effectively with the social and political issues that are part of the process of producing space, architects must base their praxis on three elements: the political attitude, the use of aesthetics as politics and the role in large scale process of disruption.

Finally, this paper illustrates the importance of rethinking the architectural profession and use architecture as a political endeavour to deal with inequality and poverty by presenting two case studies that have found alternatives ways of producing space. Both cases in their own context have developed strategies according to the social, economic and cultural aspects of the city to disrupt the established order of things. By comparing these strategies it was confirmed that since architecture and space are two highly political elements, they should be used to reposition individuals in the society. Moreover, these two examples and many other forms of producing space in ‘formal’ and informal parts of the city proved that a recalibration of the profession is possible and urgent.
In conclusion, this dissertation states that the political *subjectivization* of architecture can be used to re-imagine the position of the marginalised and excluded in the process of producing space. This statement implies that architects can be redefined as political subjects that use basic principles of disruption to tackle the issues produced by the unjust forms of production that define contemporary cities. The concept presented in this paper does not pretend to conclude the discussion around space, its production and the role of urban practitioners, but hopes to give an additional perspective for further discussion.
Bibliography

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