

# Geo-geographical Urbanism

## Design and the Formation of the Earth's Surface in the Age of Planetary Urbanization

*The origin of architecture is not the primitive but,  
but the making of ground to establish a cosmic order around the surrounding chaos of nature.*

Vittorio Gregotti, *Il Territorio dell'Architettura*, 1983

Having Vittorio Gregotti's suggestion at its background, the aim of this symposium, within the context of the *Padiglione Architettura* at the *Milan 2015 EXPO Belle Arti*, is to frame an understanding of design and its agency as the making of synthetic *geo-graphies*: Playing upon the literal meaning of the word *geo-graphy* - the writing on the earth - the challenge presented is to unpack the relationship between design and geography, both as a discipline and as an understanding of context. It aspires to help question and conceptualize how the complex set of socioecological processes that characterize contemporary globalization are engraved into composite spatio-material geographies, and how in return these composite geographies are defining urbanization patterns and developmental trajectories.

Although theoretical in its nature, this proposition has an instrumental goal: It is a response to the need for a redefinition of context, but also for spatial categories that will be able to grasp the scale, complexity and hybrid nature of contemporary urbanization. On the one hand, urban agglomerations – the traditional locus of design practices - continue to expand and thicken, transforming larger and larger zones into polycentric landscapes of socio-techno-natural intensification, where population concentrations, infrastructures, environmental systems and productive areas, blend with each other into unprecedented formations. At the same time urbanization is widely recognized as a primary agent of a broader socio-ecological transformation that extends beyond agglomerations. What mostly constitutes the anthropogenic 'crust' that is slowly covering every square meter of the planet, is not the settlement spaces which continue to morph and expand, but rather the much more extensive and versatile patterns of *operational landscapes* that enable them: Hard or soft landscapes and waterscapes equipped for production and circulation and instrumentally aligned with the development and transformation of the global system of agglomerations. Together they make up the majority of the "used" part of the planet. The *geo-graphic* paradigm is suggested as a response to the need to grasp the contours of these multifaceted urbanization processes overcoming obsolete categories like the 'city' or the 'metropolis,' and unproductive dichotomies like the urban-rural, social-natural, human-artificial. According to the *geo-graphic* paradigm, hybrid typologies of settlement patterns, infrastructures, production and extraction landscapes, can all be examined as elements of an extended composite socio-techno-natural *urbanization fabric*.

The symposium framework suggests that as urbanization becomes a generalized phenomenon of planetary dimensions, its organizational principles become increasingly interwoven with, and not independent from, the climatic, topographic, geologic, hydrological and resource asymmetries of the earth. These elements can no longer be considered as distinct attributes of an external natural geography, as they are now being internalized into the extensive, complex and thickening urbanization fabric that extends beyond dense agglomerations to include the operational landscapes that sustain them and make them possible. How can the geographical principles of urbanization be defined? Can an appreciation of geographical determinacy guide alternative modes of urbanization? What is the scale, objective and agency of design in shaping these processes?

## Symposium schedule

**Wednesday, October 28, 2015**

(Place to be confirmed)

**20:30** | Informal dinner

**Thursday, October 29, 2015**

Grattacielo Pirelli, 31° piano, Belvedere E. Jannacci, Milano

**9:30** | Nikos Katsikis

*Introductory remarks: Geo-graphical Urbanism*

**9:50** | Franco Farinelli

*On the Geographical Nature of the Idea of the City*

**10:10** | Milica Topalovic

*Eclipse: Urbanism Beyond the City*

**10:30** | Paola Viganò

*The Horizontal Metropolis*

**10:50** | Alex Wall

*Sprawl is Dead, Long Live the Low Density City*

**11:10** | Adrian Lahoud

*The Measure of the Mediterranean*

**11:30** | Discussion

**12:30** | Lunch

The symposium builds upon the exploration of the geographic paradigm underlying the Harvard GSD *New Geographies* journal, and especially the latest issue entitled *Grounding Metabolism*, and aims to contribute to the emerging agenda of *Planetary Urbanization*, developed at Harvard GSD and ETH. It brings together an interdisciplinary selection of seminal scholars and practitioners in order to examine and discuss both the agency of geographical factors in shaping patterns of human occupation of the earth, as well as the role of design decisions and projects as geo-structures inscribed on the earth's surface. In this way the symposium aspires to explore the potentials of a *geo-graphic* paradigm to design research and practices, but also address from an interdisciplinary perspective the rich and long - but rather under-examined - intellectual exchange between geography and various design disciplines. The symposium is organized by Nikos Katsikis (Harvard GSD) within the context of the *Padiglione Architettura* at the *Milan 2015 EXPO Belle Arti*, curated by Lorenzo degli Esposti.

## Contributors

**Franco Farinelli** is head of the Department of Philosophy and Communication Studies of Bologna University, and President of AGEI (Association of Italian Geographers). He has taught geography in Stockholm, Geneva, Los Angeles (UCLA), Berkeley and in Paris at Sorbonne and Ecole Normale Supérieure.

**Nikos Katsikis** is an architect and urbanist, Instructor in Urban Planning and Design and Doctor of Design candidate and at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD). At the GSD he is also research associate in the New Geographies Lab, and in the Urban Theory Lab. Since 2012 he is on the editorial board of *New Geographies* journal and co-editor of *New Geographies 06: Grounding Metabolism* (Harvard University Press, 2014). He holds a professional degree in Architecture with highest distinction (2006) and a Master in Architecture and Spatial Design (2009) from the National Technical University of Athens. His recent work includes contributions in *MONU* (2014), *Implosions / Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (N. Brenner ed., Berlin: Jovis, 2013) and the forthcoming books with N. Brenner, *Is the world urban? Towards a critique of geospatial ideology* (Actar, 2016).

**Adrian Lahoud** is an architect, researcher and educator. Before his current role as Head of Architecture at the Royal College of Art London he taught at The Bartlett School of Architecture UCL where he was Director of the Urban Design masters, and at the Architectural Association. Prior to this, he was part of the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths as a Director of the MA programme and a researcher on the Forensic Architecture, ERC project. He received his PhD from the University of Technology Sydney. In 2010 he guest edited a special issue of *Architectural Design* titled 'Post-traumatic Urbanism'. More recently, his work has been published in *E-Flux*, *Grain Vapour Ray: Textures of the Anthropocene*, *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, *The Journal of Architecture*, *Architecture and the Paradox of Dissidence*, *New Geographies*, and *Performing Trauma*.

**Milica Topalovic** has been attached to the ETH Zürich and the Future Cities Laboratory in Singapore as Assistant Professor of Architecture and Territorial Planning since 2011. She graduated with distinction from the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade, received Master's degree from the Dutch Berlage Institute and was head of research at the ETH Studio Basel. Her projects focus on territorial urbanization, in particular the relations between cities and their hinterlands. She contributed essays on urbanism, architecture and art to magazines including *Oase*, *trans* and *San Rocco* and authored *Belgrade. Formal/Informal: A Research on Urban Transformation; Hinterland. Singapore-Johor-Riau; and Constructed Land – Singapore 1924-2012*.

**Paola Viganò** is an architect and urbanist, Professor in Urbanism at Università IUAV of Venice and in Urban Theory and Urban Design at the EPFL (Lausanne). In 1990 she founded Studio with Bernardo Secchi realizing many projects in Europe. The Hostel in De Hoge Rielen (Belgium) has been selected for the EU Mies Van der Rohe award 2015. Studio has developed visions for "Greater Paris", Brussels 2040, "New Moscow", and Montpellier 2040. In 2013 she received the Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme in France and in 2015 she won the international competition for the City of Science quarter in Rome. Among her recent publications are: *I territori dell'Urbanistica*, Officina, Roma, 2010; *Territorialism*, Harvard GSD, 2014.

**Alex Wall** received his Diploma at the Architectural Association, London, and is Practice Professor of Architecture and Landscape at the University of Virginia. He is a former Professor of Urban Design at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany, and partner of UMnet, where together with 'asp' Stuttgart, he has won several national and international design and planning competitions. His books include *Cities of Childhood* (1989), *Victor Gruen* (2005), and in preparation with Sabine Mueller, *urbanisms and sustainabilities*. His articles include "Programming the Surface" (1999) and, with Susan N. Snyder, "Emerging Landscapes of Movement and Logistics" (1998) and "The Future is Already Here" (2014).