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# Uneven growth: tactical urbanism for expanding megacities

2 April 2015 | By [Charlotte Skene Catling](#)



Strategic speculation in Hong Kong, Istanbul, Lagos, Mumbai, New York and Rio de Janeiro is challenging the architectural profession to rethink itself beyond the realm of building and address policy-making

*'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ... it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ...'*

Charles Dickens' opening lines to *The Tale of Two Cities*, a story of London and Paris before revolution, and the desperate living conditions of the poor that led inevitably to it, could equally apply now. *Uneven Growth --Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities*, is currently showing at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and as curator Pedro Gadanhó observes in the excellent catalogue of the same name, 'in 2030, the world's population will be a staggering eight billion people. Of these, two-thirds will live in cities. Most will be poor'.<sup>1</sup> The cover shows an image of bright green tennis courts and the turquoise swimming pool of an expensive condominium in Morumbi, São Paulo, separated by only a thin line of concrete from the adjacent small-scaled, messy density of the red-brick Paraisópolis favela in what looks like a crude photo-collage, but is in fact an even cruder urban juxtaposition of the very rich and the very poor.



*Uneven Growth* is a tale of six cities: Hong Kong, Istanbul, Lagos, Mumbai, New York and Rio de Janeiro, each chosen to exemplify different characteristics of an almost unimaginable scale of global growth, and to be the site of strategic architectural, urban, social and political speculation. Gadanho avoided cities that have been the focus of recent intense research, and selected some that would represent others, for instance, New York ‘stands as a case that bears comparison to relevant but absent metropolises such as London, Paris, Tokyo or Los Angeles’. He then created six collaborative partnerships to make joint proposals, with the caveat that one member of each would be based in-situ and so have an ‘intimate knowledge of local circumstances’, while the other, ‘trans-geographical’ partner would provide confrontation through offering an external perspective. In each case, ‘their previous practices should somehow be entangled with their city’s realities while revealing changing stances toward the potential role of architects as urban catalysts and activists’.

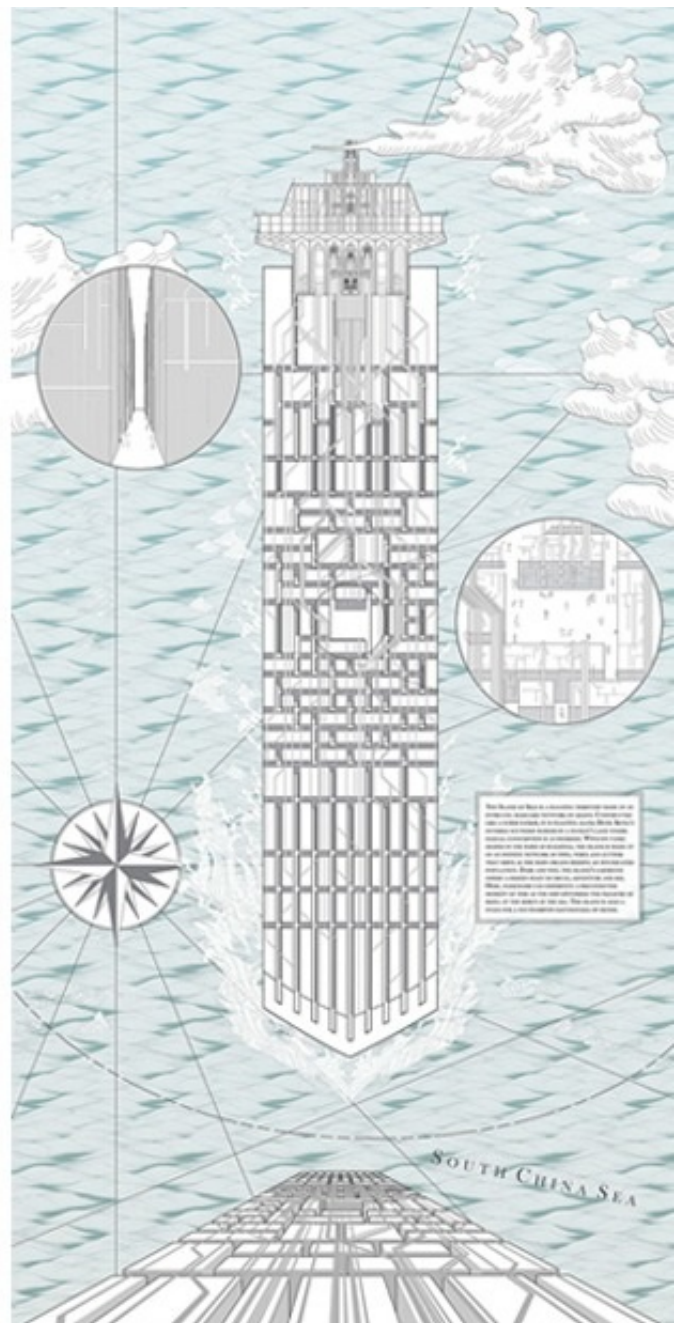
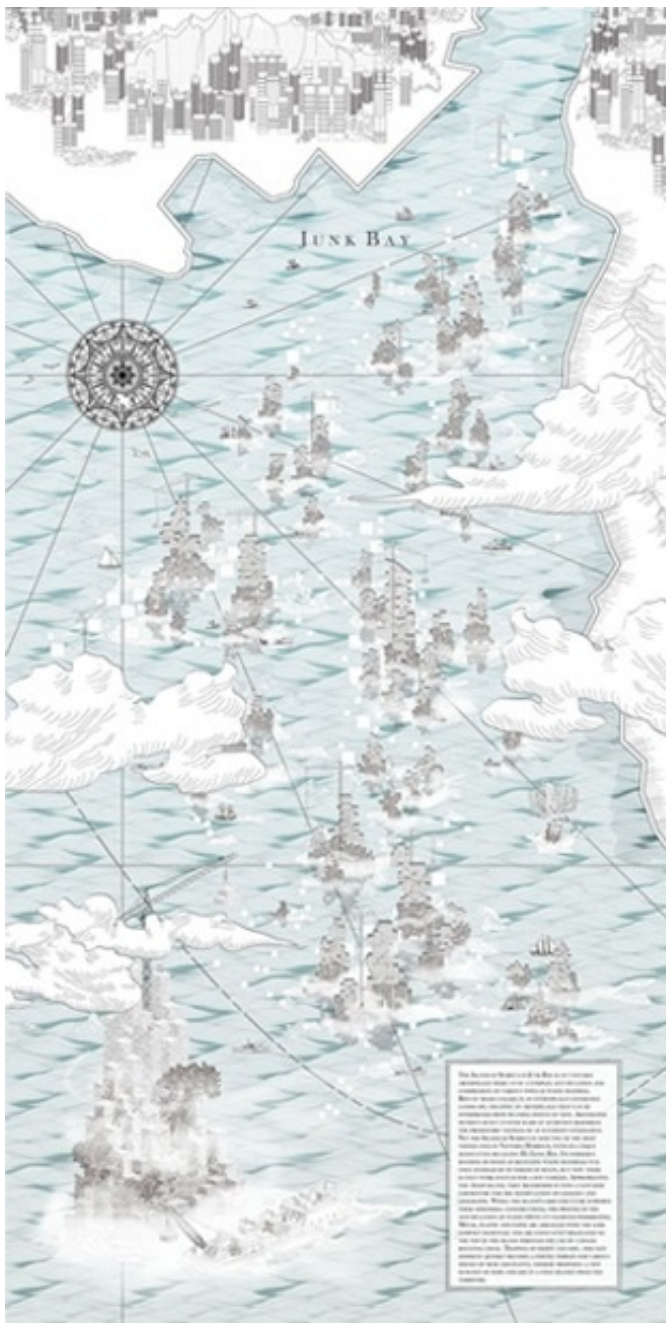


In São Paulo, the Paraisópolis favela and the Morumbi gated community are separated only by a thin concrete wall, revealing the crude juxtaposition of the very rich and the very poor

The MoMA format of collaboratively researching and developing proposals in depth, over time, is necessary for avoiding superficiality when dealing with a subject of this magnitude and importance. But given the vast scale of the subject, the exhibition itself is unexpectedly small and condensed, discreet even. Representation is one of several challenges where much of the material is necessarily statistical or temporal. Because the exhibition spaces are limited, all walls are densely covered with illustrations, maps, diagrams and monitors for films and animated proposals. Each city elicited its own very distinct aesthetic response, made richer and more complex with the overlay of the diverse nationalities of the collaborating teams.

MAP Office, Hong Kong, and Network Architecture Lab, Columbia University, New York, proposed a series of man-made islands in a project that seems torn between answering the real, pragmatic threats to Hong Kong of rising sea levels through global warming and a 50 per cent population increase, and fictional speculation through an Anthropocene dystopia as poetic cautionary tale. ‘Fragments of trash collide...[with]...*The Island of Surplus*, an unstable archipelago of ... discarded material ... in Junk Bay’. *The Island of the Self* is a lawless super-tanker, like a floating Kowloon. ‘Dark and wet, the labyrinth offers a secretive feast of drugs, adventure and sex.’ These messy, Ballardian exaggerations of historic or existing conditions in Hong Kong are somewhat surprisingly rendered as eight panels of delicate, crisp, drawings on a blue patterned sea with some of the conventions of Chinese handscrolls and Renaissance cartography.





The Island of Surplus (left) and the Island of the Self (right) are part of MAP Office + Network Architecture Lab's speculative proposal of eight artificial islands for Hong Kong addressing many of the population's future needs

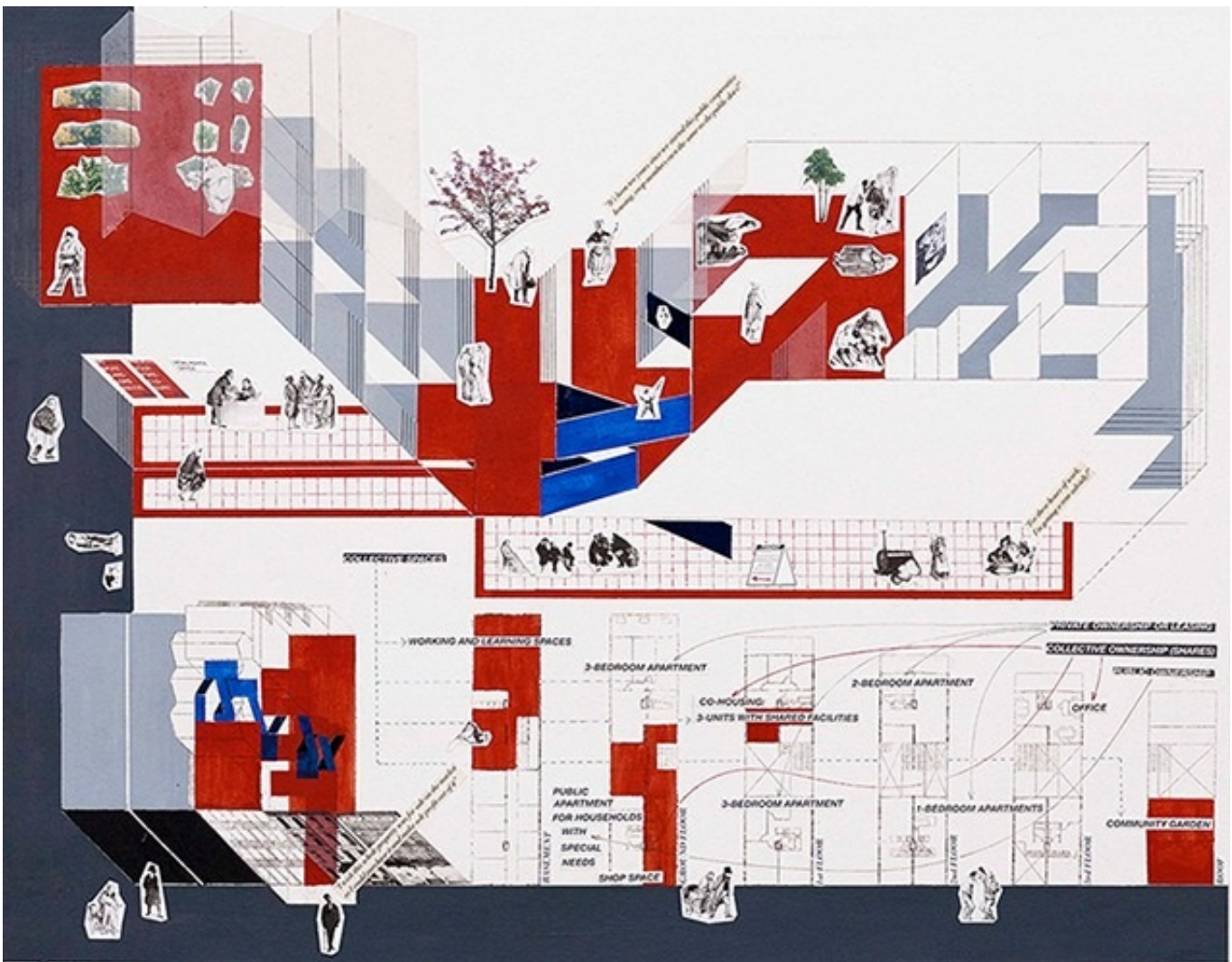
New York City was the focus of SITU Studio, New York, and Cohabitation Strategies (CohStra), Rotterdam and New York. In their short film, *Uneven Growth – Revealing the Other New York City*, human rights groups, NGOs, academics and a priest discuss the failures of an urban model that reduces real estate solely to commodity, used for sheltering investment rather than people. Dynamic diagrams peopled with figures from early political cartoons visually suggest that conditions for the city's new poor compare to those at the end of the 19th century, where informality and invisibility also meant exclusion from

policy and decision making. Dense, informal living, so visible in cities like Mumbai or Rio, is hidden and growing in the attics, basements and industrial spaces of New York where there are up to 200,000 illegally converted apartments. The focus of this collaboration is social, political and economic, with proposals for a 'Housing Cooperative Trust' as an alternative system of 'hybrid tenure ownership' that builds long-term equity for the future allowing housing stock to grow rather than shrink in scale and value, and 'Community Growth Corporations': where undeveloped outer-borough air-rights are leveraged to finance imaginative networks of improvements and densification through the addition of informal housing on rooftops, in backyards and other spaces formerly considered inaccessible.

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Superpool, Istanbul and Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée, Paris propose 'KITO Compounds' as transformations of the sterile TOKI mass housing on the outskirts of Istanbul. Interventions to the existing towers turn blank facades into 'productive envelopes', food and energy farming create a shared public commons, while the existing walls and fences that surround the tower blocks are expanded with additional programme, hosting 'production, service and distribution activities such as social enterprises, time banks, local shops and markets, fab labs and local radio'. Self-built structures (using the ubiquitous 3-D printing) bring qualities of a traditional city that accrued over time to these lifeless satellites. These interventions are presented as green overlays to low-resolution, black and white photographs and, curiously, through the character of an animated, entrepreneurial foot.





As a result of global investment and profit-driven development, New York faces a marked scarcity of affordable housing. SITU Studio + Cohabitation Strategies respond by proposing a Housing Cooperative that builds long-term equity for the future allowing housing stock to grow rather than shrink in scale and values

Through a series of elegant line drawings, RUA Arquitetos, Rio de Janeiro, and MAS Urban Design, ETH Zurich, explore the relationships between the 'asfalto and morro', the asphalt, 'official city', and the informal hillside favelas using verandas as semi-commercial units, 'transitional spaces ... architectural elements that are simultaneously domestic and public'. Their proposal highlights the already successful aspects of informal development which they present as a series of mini-narratives, through imagined characters, goods and the vehicle of 'Varanda Products'. The simplification to black and white graphics reads as a Swiss overlay on a South American phenomenon, and makes the cumulative, unplanned organic nature of the favela somehow more logical and legible.

URBZ: user-generated cities, Mumbai, and Ensamble Studio/MIT-POPlab, Madrid and Cambridge, approach Mumbai not as a 'tabula rasa', but a 'tabula pronta', an urban 'readymade'. Through a series of photo 'mash-ups', mixing streets from Dharavi with those of similar scale and density from Sao Paulo, Tokyo and Perugia they speculate on how these spaces might adapt were security of tenure granted to the inhabitants. With this premise, they show pragmatic responses to existing realities, a project currently under construction, and sectional collages using a variety of architectural representational techniques to suggest the range of diversity possible in informal, self-built communities.

As part of their process of 'Learning from Lagos', NLÉ, Lagos and Amsterdam, and Zoohaus/Inteligencias Colectivas, Madrid, created a map that both relates their findings to the city fabric and proposes a series of urban tactical interventions, that build on the existing infrastructure. The map is a beguiling graphic creation in shades of khaki, brown and green that sits somewhere between disruptive coloration camouflage and a Richard Scarry pictogram. Their proposed strategy aims to bridge physical and socio-economic gaps by rethinking the 'three common challenges of energy supply, water supply and transportation ... through new prototypes, urban infrastructures, and local collective intelligence'. Rather than resisting the inundation that is currently one of the biggest urban obstacles, they embrace it to create a floating African Water City, addressing each of their identified challenges in turn.





This collaged section perspective by Studio/MIT-Poplab aims to expose the richness and potential of informal self-built communities, exploring the 'what if' security of tenure was granted to inhabitants

The outcome is an enormous, brightly coloured aerial perspective as counterpoint to the waterlogged shanty-towns they propose to adapt and reconfigure. *Uneven Growth* is the third of a trio of exhibitions initiated by MoMA's former Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, Barry Bergdoll, that share a general approach and methodology. In 2009, he developed a MoMA Architects in Residence programme in collaboration with PS1 Contemporary Art Center, to tap the potential of architects liberated by recession. The first exhibition that emerged, *Rising Currents*, proposed possibilities for Manhattan's shoreline with a higher sea level due to global warming. *Foreclosure*, in 2011, brought five teams of architects, planners, ecologists, engineers and designers together to suggest 'routes through' the sub-prime, mortgage foreclosure crisis. *Uneven Growth*, in collaboration with MAK, the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, is perhaps the most ambitious in scope, with problems of global warming and economic infrastructures implicit in the megacity futures put forward by the six teams. Ricky Burdett, Nader Tehrani, David Harvey, Saskia Sassen and Teddy Cruz, formed an advisory committee as well as contributing essays to the catalogue, and demonstrate a spectrum of

knowledge from the architectural and urban to the anthropological, geographic, social and global.

Gadano is following the edict set by Alfred H Barr Jr, in *Art in Our Time*, 1939, that The Museum of Modern Art 'is a laboratory: in its experiments the public is invited to participate'. The urgent problems we face need architects and urbanists to think and act strategically beyond the realm of building. In order for essential social, political and economic change to happen, the public must also be actively engaged; but this assumes that democracy still functions. In his compelling, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, French economist Thomas Piketty writes about wealth and income disparity arguing that inequality is inherent in the nature of capitalism: it will inevitably get more extreme and can only be tackled through state intervention. Failing this, democracy itself is under threat. So where does design need to begin? Teddy Cruz asks, 'can architects intervene in the reorganisation of political institutions, new forms of governance, economic systems, research and pedagogy, and new conceptions of cultural and economic production? It makes me think that we need to start by opening up and expanding our conventional modalities of practice, making architecture a political field and a cognitive system that can enable the "public" to access complexity, building collective capacity for political agency and action at local scales.' Architects need to be involved both at the 'top down' and 'bottom up' levels of urbanism by becoming both part of collaborative teams embedded in the early stages of policy-making at one end, and through acupuncture interventions applied to the intuitive, informal growth of cities at the other.

Gadano has described curation as a form of criticism, and here he is challenging the architectural profession to rethink itself. The result is an essentially optimistic show about a pessimistic future. One hopes that the abundant ingenuity available within the discipline, clearly demonstrated in *Uneven Growth*, can be applied in reality. Now is the time to fundamentally restructure the way in which global megacities will develop so that this can become the 'age of wisdom', rather than one of staggering foolishness in an endless 'winter of despair'.

## Reference

1 Unless otherwise mentioned, quotes throughout from: *Uneven Growth: Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities*, Pedro Gadanh, Museum of Modern Art, 2014

## Uneven Growth – Tactical Urbanisms for Expanding Megacities

**Where:** MoMA, New York

**When:** Until 25 May 2015

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