

Colloquium UnSITEly!
Leveraging Design to Improve Urban Construction Sites

Summary of session 2

« Worksites and Society »

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The worksite is a time to be experienced together.

There is a vacant lot in the city. Then the machines and workers arrive, with the raw materials, lots of raw materials, the construction materials, plenty of them too, along with all kinds of auditory and visual nuisances, but also a certain magical impression of a world being born. It's like the first six days of creation. And on the seventh day, Man is created – or in this case, the Citizen.

Then things get complicated. On the one hand, there are those who want to peep through the hoardings, and on the other those who just go about their daily lives. And at that point the barriers, the symbolic and tangible constructs, don't really fit well with the reality of modern society. And with good reason: more than ever, citizens want to be engaged and involved in defining their city. They have powerful tools in the form of associations, political lobby groups, citizen assemblies and so on. They become part of the worksite and, if ignored, abandon ship in the midst of the work (as on the wharves of the Ile de Nantes project developed by SAMOA) and then we have to invent their presence in the heart of the project. It's a very delicate intellectual and practical balancing act.

We also saw that in Saint-Etienne, under the direction of EPASE with the ETC designers collective, interactions with local residents during urban renewal projects were complicated to handle, lengthy and mobilizing. That the time during the project, before and afterward, is just as interesting as the initial idea. It is a time of exchange when roots (as defined by philosopher Simone Weil) can be established, for the very rapid changes occurring in the environment will by turns create uprootedness and, as an immediate reaction, a move to seek rootedness. Local residents seek this vital rootedness in the city's proposal and that of the developers. It translates into tangible action, a far cry from simply decorating the hoardings. The basic objective is to think about others in a reconsidered space. In London, the "pocket park" on the Tate worksite, presented by Donald Hyslop, is an ongoing experiment, a test space that will probably give rise to other actions. The idea of chipping a park out of the worksite clearly shows that all this discussion regarding "worksite design" amounts to a negotiation on feasibility and the public space/worksite interface.

A worksite is a specific moment in time, when there is a risk of misunderstanding. For while the space is temporarily empty, it fills with everyone's imaginations, desires and assumptions. The propensity to imagine something that doesn't yet exist is terribly human. Just as this search for meaning is terribly human, according to cognitive neuroscience researcher Colin Ellard, who had us look through the two fairly well located openings on our faces, and consider how what we perceive leads us to turn our heads to see our complete surroundings. Under these conditions, it is complicated to grasp a world as complex as the worksite. That is why we need so much patience with human beings.



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Olivier Peyricot has been the Director of the IDSland design agency for 14 years, and an independent designer for 5 years. He has worked on new object typologies, experimental habitats, urban forms hybridized through design, and new forms of mobility, in collaboration with industrial and service companies and institutions.

His research results have been exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, the MoMA and at the Néotu, Tools and Mercier&Associés galleries. His work has been included in the FNAC (France) and MoMA (USA) collections.