

Urbanism in humanitarian settings: unacknowledged and interdisciplinary conflicts

(Re)Constructing the City (RIBA) and Grand Challenges (UCL)

Kate CRAWFORD Transcript of talk

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Alison Killing and I have been working on this project for a while and we like to think of it as a sort of "constructive criticism" project where she's constructive and I do criticism.

So, I'm going to do that today: last thing on a Friday which is what you don't need or want. I think the first thing I want to say is to really get you to the place of extreme discomfort that I'm in about the humanitarian conversation about "urban", whatever that its.

And the example I like to give because it appeals to me - is that I went to this really brilliant comedy night at a venue in London and it was called "Feminism in the 90s" and the stand-up comic did this funny thing where she cut clips from when she was at university being a feminist and then followed some of the women she'd idolised or been really jealous of to ask them 20 years later about feminism. And then they had a panel, which as you can imagine was four women - one had been born a woman but didn't identify as either a man or a woman - then they opened the debate to the floor, which as you can imagine was 90% women: and the first thing that happened was that this middle-aged white man piped and had loads of stuff to say. And then he did again: and you think: it's really adorable that you're a feminist but can you shut up now and let the women speak. I am that man: who has just realised that it was out of turn and I'm a bit embarrassed. I was being too loud and I should just shut up now. And I feel like that about talking about "urban" and humanitarianism.

For me, the whole humanitarian conversation about urban is that man - and really the people who should be having the loudest conversation about urban disasters are not here, they are out governing cities day to day. Mayors, officials, municipal engineers, activists.

Why?

Why do we want to talk about this discourse problem? The problem of how we talk about urban.

Well I'll just read you something that one of the senior urban planners from the Haitian government said at the urban form. She said:

"As urban planners, we just did not have a strong enough narrative after the earthquake: one that would convince those making early decisions that we had to respond to the needs of the city"

I want to just draw your attention to the fact that that narrative obstacle of talking about the city: it's not a problem of Haiti, it's not a problem of disasters.

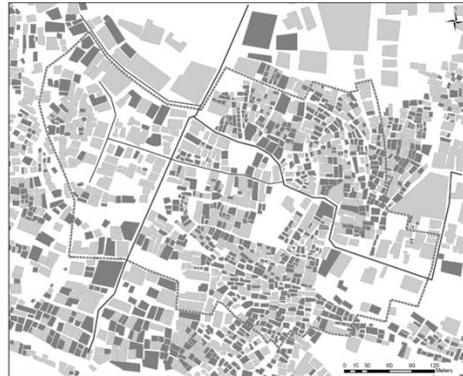
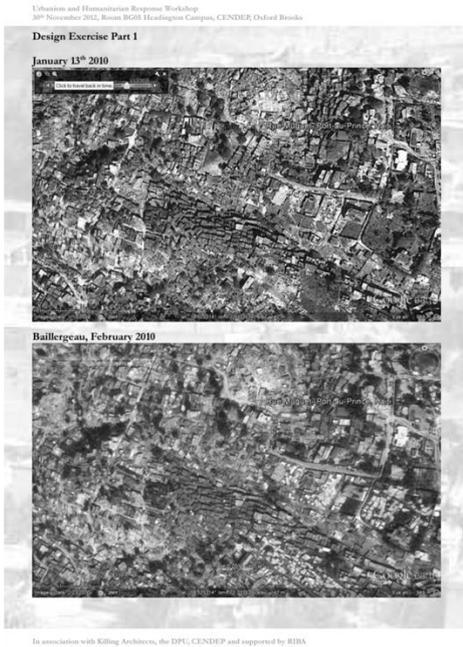
I've just been involved in a political enquiry in London where the Greater London Assembly is investigating decisions to demolish or refurbish social housing and when you get professionals in the room - let alone professionals and residents from those social housing estates - they talk at cross-purposes about the city. It's not easily understood: one of the conservative members of the London Assembly said to the panel of experts "what's wrong with regeneration? how could it be bad - it's new stuff". Well that's London but what I'm saying is, this is all over. It's not just about you, me, we.



UCL's [Engineering Exchange work on Refurbishment and Demolition](#) for the [Greater London Assembly](#) investigation

What?

So Alison and I ran a workshop 2 years ago and one of the things we tried to do was to use films made in Haiti to bring everyone in the audience - which included urban planners, urban designers from London and other parts of Europe with people who'd worked for humanitarian agencies - together. The films were to stop we - humanitarians - from saying "look you just don't understand, you weren't there" and instead to bring people to the same departure point.



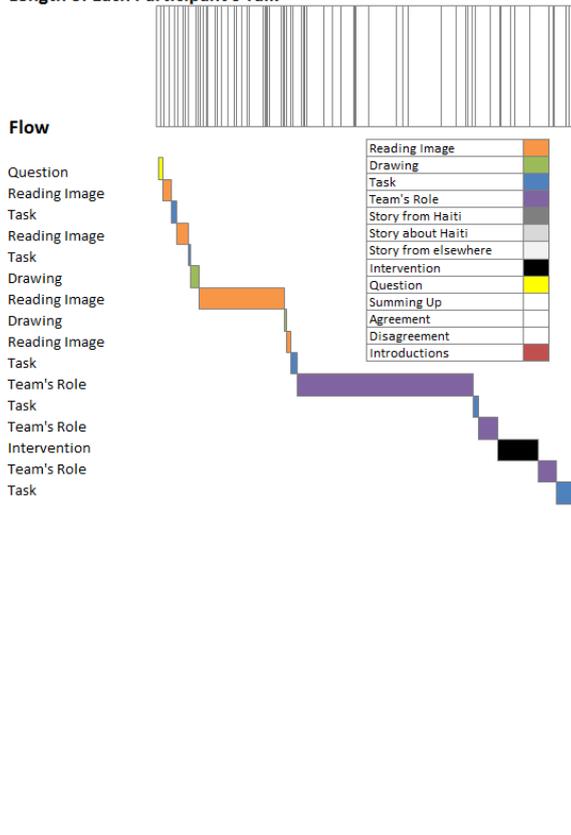
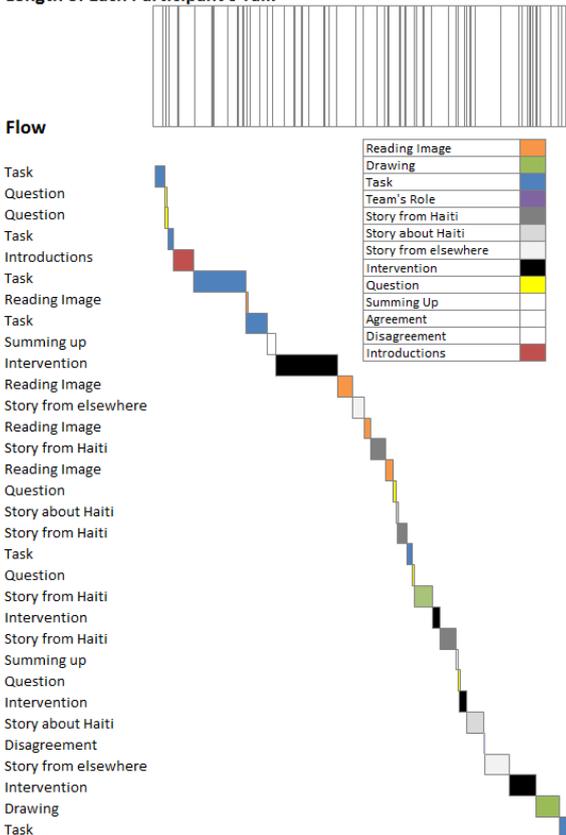
Materials provided to participants at the (re)constructing the city workshop

Institutional and Independent Practitioners

International Designers

Length of Each Participant's Talk

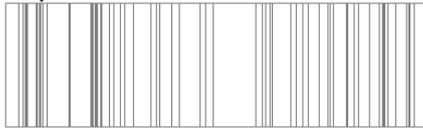
Length of Each Participant's Talk



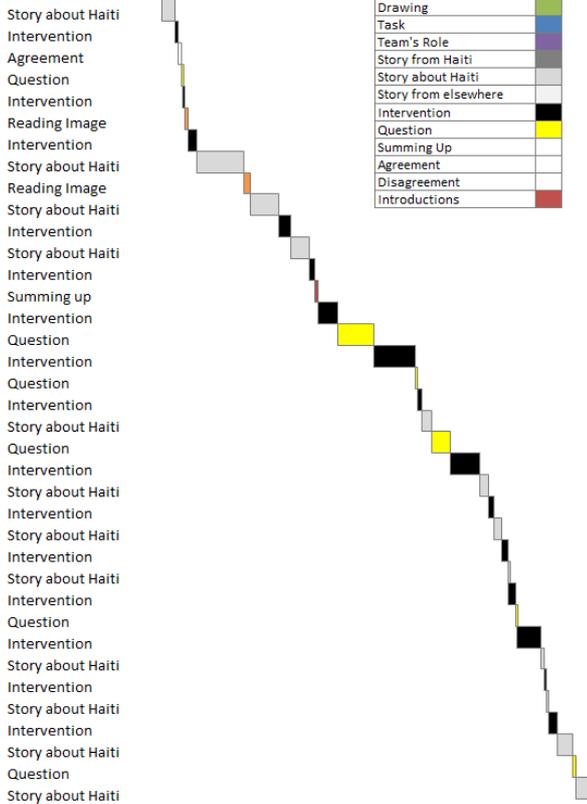
Flow of conversation chart from final report

Experienced Non Humanitarians

Length of Each Participant's Talk

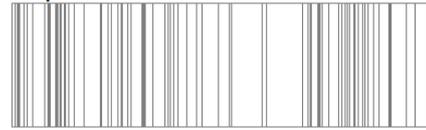


Flow

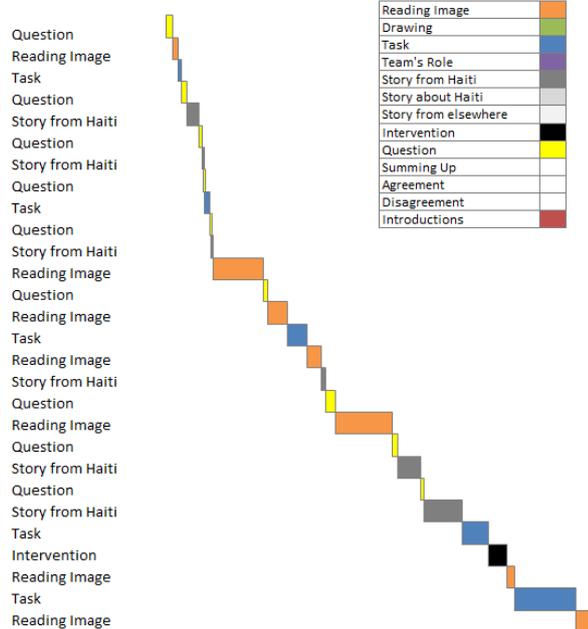


Curious Generalists

Length of Each Participant's Talk



Flow



Flow of conversation chart from final report

And we did a lot of analysis of how people in the break out groups from that workshop - doing a neighbourhood design exercise together - talked about the city and some really interesting paradoxes came up. There are 9 of them and I will run through them - but before I do that I want to read you a little extract from a book by someone called David Harvey, who wrote (among many other works) a book in 1973 called "Social Justice and the City" and you might ask why this talk is called urbanism in humanitarian settings - well it's because I don't want it to be about humanitarians, obviously - for the many reasons to "shut up" explained at the beginning - and this is what David Harvey says urbanism is:

"urbanism is not a "thing" in the ordinary sense of the word. The city as a built form can, it is true, be regarded as a set of objects arranged according to some pattern in space. But there are few who would argue that cities are just that. ... the city has to be regarded as a functioning totality within which everything is related to everything else." p.303 Harvey

"An understanding of urbanism and of the social-process-spatial-form theme requires that we understand how human activity [including talking about the city] creates the need for specific spatial concepts ..." (Harvey, 1973)

The "specific spatial concepts" - keep them in mind...

What did we find?

Ok so finally, the 9 paradoxes that came out from this workshop strongly related to this idea of how the city was woven together, the first was:

Just talking shapes intervention, fundamental to analysis, managing this project, making films and to humanitarian practice in the city.

Glibness of humanitarian solutions to urban response: partnerships, tools, skills and area-based intervention.

1. **Weaving or cutting:** Tension between interweaving analysis or breaking it down into solvable elements. (urbanists) trying to weave together a "whole" "urban fabric" of "relationships". It only worked well when it was quite a senior urban planning person up against quite a senior humanitarian person. That was the only time this conversation could really come through - so think about that gender issue - gender being power. And what happens when humanitarians do this is that start describing: actors as definitive, homogenous entities like "the community", "the municipality"; and start talking about their own actions as gentle, neutral "processes";
2. **Time and change:** as "phases", "timeframes" and "terms" and changes by the features that continued, transitioned or disappeared but without history. And you end up, by **counter-posing of the "emergency" phase with the long term: an organising principle (probably following criticism in the discourse about the artificial and unhelpful separation of funding for relief and development) and as some kind of justification for intervention based on vantage point of (experts) removed from the situation since they are able to see ahead (Ex. 6).**

Excerpt 1 International Designers

4d... yeah people might be preoccupied with the present. And we have to look beyond.

3. **Camps and risks:** in this workshop, the exercise was to talk about aerial images and people started talking about "camps" and "risks" including "rubble", "hazards", "slopes" (Excerpts XX); to "settlements", "situations" and "vulnerable areas" and places "at risk" that were social and physical; to vulnerability as a property of people or described in terms of "fear" and "violence". The participants couldn't see camps but they demarcated camps themselves. And I'm not saying - sometimes people misunderstand me here - I'm not saying camps don't exist or shouldn't exist; displacement doesn't happen or relocation shouldn't happen; or there is no transition and transitional shelter kits are never needed; risks don't exist they are socially constructed... What I'm saying is: those are "specific spatial concepts". What I'm asking is are they the most useful demarcations for you to understand what's going on. I would say not really. And do they get a disproportionate amount of air time and does this shape how we respond? Does having a "loud" conversation exclusively about these concepts limit how we look at the city? And is this self-serving: when people talk about it that **muddle together organising principles with the presupposition of intervention: bad areas, needy targets. If there are camps we'll go. If there are camps we'll draw a line around them - and the academic critique of this is then we make our own rules in that space and dominate it.**
4. **Drawing:** People wouldn't draw: people in the room who were policy makers whose job it was to write and draft policy would not draft anything as a drawing. Professional participants to hold on to these two ideas (value drawing and value non-professionals) but to reject drawing as worthwhile for themselves (disdain drawing by professionals) not because it is better done by 'the community' but because it seen as an unnecessary, even second-rate way of knowing. Default hierarchy of **ways of knowing (deeply rooted in western divisions of thinking, doing and specialisation) that privileges writing and measuring and accords prestige to propositional knowledge over drawing, imagining or craft. This values work in narrow terms (strategic, technical, urban expertise) and confuses the relative harms or utilities implied by writing, talking, drawing or making.**
5. **Caricature:** The other strange thing was that people who turned away from the aerial images started to do this really weird thing where they caricatured - sometimes really negatively - other activities. Somehow, not being distracted by the spatial images meant personifying absent voices necessarily goes beyond aerial images, homogenous "community" and monolithic "Haitian power" to invoke multiple actors and relationships and, indeed, beyond idealised or romantic stereotypes that the local as automatically good. **But somehow rejecting the bird's eye view as a matter of principle led on to disparaging caricature of the motivations of others that continues to afford some justification for intervention (local wants or needs that are inconsistent or myopic).**
6. **Intelligent Design:** Also because we said it was a design exercise people assumed immediately that they had to do something in the place and that they were not in the place. They didn't think - ooh I wonder what it would be

like to be there - they assumed we've arrived, we're going to do something. Framing this as a design exercise is that **participants assume they are professionals arriving to do something and distinguish themselves from the 'community' and this distinction, by dramatically drawing attention to one inequality of voice and power, obviates the need for participants to talk about their own relative power within the group - age, experience, gender, prestige of discipline. Exposes professional differences but does not undermine the assumption that it is possible to know something, even from the ludicrously limited information to hand.** Tendency to look down from above on the part of planners and humanitarians, less a clash of disciplines and more a routine practice of various disciplines and experts (Ex. XX).

7. **God:** The group so resistant to "playing god" had, between them, **the most influence by virtue of their seniority, experience or employer: unable to resist describing interventions as they caricatured people**, albeit passively "there needs to be a mechanism to remove people..." or tentatively.
8. **Process:** **simultaneously presupposes intervention and softens dangerous separation of who is intervening from what is to be done. Prescriptive and normative: terminology deliberately designed not to be presumptuous, pre-emptive or pre-deterministic.**
9. **Infrastructure:** **described a rich social world but conflate many types of abstract infrastructure and respond with infrastructure to all things human, psychological or vulnerable** (Ex. XXX)¹ e.g. complexity of sexual violence (Ex. 7), thoughts and hopes (Ex. 8) was "infrastructure".

Excerpt 2 Experienced Non-Humanitarians

1e: ... I think in Haiti given the levels of sexual violence that were in Port au Prince prior to the earthquake and now you have got girls, vulnerable women living under canvas... I think that for me is a massive priority...

1D: Well that's part of the infrastructure isn't it?

Excerpt 3 International Designers

4d: ... Can we sort of suggest that we are a listening device? We are a way to make various moves that turn whoever all of these people are in this big sheet, a way of turning all of their thoughts and hopes for that place into... like just hearing those thoughts and turning them into something. Set ourselves up as being... trying to come up with that infrastructure...

I ran through that very fast and it's really complicated. It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do analytically is understand what people were saying but the point I'm trying to make here is that the power thing we talk about, which is us and them, us as experts and them as beneficiaries. It happens between us and I think a lot of the dysfunction that we put out there as if it's a dysfunction of the city when actually it's a dysfunction of our own professional conversations that I'm talk about we frequently do in meetings and we don't realise.

Why is this specifically relevant to urban and not to all intervention? Well it's because these are places where there are already professionals, our peers, planners, officials and politicians and we need to be conscious in real-time of the way our conversations with them build a narrative of action and perhaps help to throw light on their conversations - like the one at the London Assembly - between themselves.

I'd like to finish with quote from another book crush that I have along with David Harvey and it's a guy who says: Mastery [of a stochastic art - by which Aristotle meant a stochastic art is like medicine, it's like fiddling with something complicated that exists and has some randomness about it]

"Mastery [of a stochastic art] is compatible with failure to achieve its end...This experience of failure tempers the conceit of mastery ... In diagnosing and fixing things made by others, one is confronted with obscurities, and must remain constantly open to the signs by which they reveal themselves." (Crawford, 2012)

So I would like to say let's think of our work more as a stochastic art: interfering in things, intervening in places that were already made and that the making of them was by a social process, something extremely political, and let's not

¹ The humanitarian architecture, meanwhile, has no infrastructure coordination or planning function.

ignore or forget that.

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References

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