



opposite: View from the artificial beach at the tip of Dubai's artificial Palm Island towards the artificial skyline. Don't be fooled. Dubai isn't really a city, it's a cruise ship sailing in the desert.

top: Shovels of the world, unite! There are as many ways to dig as there are countries. Still, such local customisation comes from the global factory: China (in its showroom: Yiwu).

centre: An architectural masterclass. The imposing geniality of Louis Kahn's parliament building in Dhaka doesn't reside in its celebrated tectonics but rather in its ability to create a monument – and in that process the notion of a nation.

bottom: Billboards advertising enormous new developments have started to invade Phnom Penh's prime locations at a time when Cambodia's obsession with its tragic past obscures any collective vision for the future.

Invitations to the collective to run workshops started in familiar territory – Buenos Aires, Talca, Lima – cities where we dealt with the usual daily round of problems and possibilities: illegality and irresponsibility; opportunity and ingenuity. Gradually we moved into an area in which we have become almost specialists: the Caribbean. Over the past few years collective members have organised several workshops, competitions and research projects in that part of the world, where the most beautiful places have become all-inclusive package destinations for mass tourism.

But can't these single-subject Latinos deal with somewhere else? Perennial local crises seem to predicate our fixation with the local, while we appear content merely to read about the rest of the world in someone else's diary or blog. Yet, strangely enough, a new period for Supersudaca has recently dawned and, almost by accident, has seen our increasing involvement in Asia.

Let Asian Stories begin.

Kuala Lumpur Fix

'Malaysia ... truly Asia,' that CNN tune went round and round in our heads for the entire duration of the 30-hour flight from Buenos Aires until our landing at metabolist Kurokawa's airport, when the gentle voice of the flight attendant announced: '... 32 degrees Celsius. Death penalty for drug trafficking and please enjoy your stay....' Malaysia – where it's all about standards, rules and quotas. X% Malay, Y% Chinese and Z% Indian. This non-melting pot strangely enforces its diversity but discourages mixing. On every level 'positive discrimination' ensures x%, y% and z% – for university grants, jobs, political representation. The same goes for the city where a futuristic monorail public transport system hovers above streets without sidewalks that run alongside open sewers. No in-between. Seems like renovation doesn't exist as a concept. 1+1 will always be 1+1 and never 2. For instance, the government decision to create a better city resulted in a new city... somewhere else: Putra Yaya. A brand new town with all the government buildings and amenities. The architecture there is X% Islamic, y% Tuscan, z% High Tech ... diversity, but no mix.

Tokyo bittersweet

We were asked to go to Tokyo on a very strange mission: to help save the lively arty neighbourhood of Shimokitazawa. Save it not from greedy developers as we initially thought, but from the highly efficient Japanese government planning department that, according to its uncontested 50-year-old plan, contemplates building a road through it. To save it, to beat the heavy planning machinery at its own game, we thought the neighbourhood should become a legend in its own right, insulate its aura so completely that it becomes a gizmo. Fetishism seemed the only deadly bullet capable of piercing the hermetically sealed Japanese dogged perseverance. September 2010, and Shimokitazawa is still standing.

Dubai Boat

Don't be fooled. Dubai isn't really a city, it's simply the largest, most extraordinary, best, first-class cruise ship on earth – yes, instead of the sea it sails the desert. Don't make a claim for public space because there's nothing public about it; it's all private, it's owned not governed. It's where credit cards could easily replace passports. Nothing is produced in Dubai. Everything is carefully selected and brought on board: from Swiss cheese to German cars, from Italian suits to Russian escorts. It all ends here. And, unbelievably, it all seems to work.

Marketing? Outside 40°C; inside, malls with ski slopes. Check. Engineering? Artificial islands with every extravagant shape imaginable – palm trees, world map. Check. Planning? Airport to highway, to hotel, to marina, to highest tower; the future flows. Check. Branding? Interior and graphic design as ultra-efficient atmosphere reinforcements producing a just-in-time palimpsest of familiar occidental brands, even those with which you are unfamiliar. Check.

What about architecture? Anything interesting? What's cool? ... Nothing. So many buildings, erected at such speed, so much hype and yet not a single remarkable architectural experience. Despite our Latin frivolity/tolerance, our *Learning from Las Vegas* training and trademark Supersudaca open-mindedness, we couldn't believe to what extent we were both fascinated by this consummate achievement in

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human entrepreneurship and simultaneously repelled in the face of such a coherent assemblage of perverse fakeness at such social, economic and environmental cost. Dubai is *Baywatch* pending season 12. Hot and hollow. Maybe the global financial crisis is to Dubai what the iceberg was to the *Titanic* ... but maybe just Dubai is a real city with the capacity to reinvent itself before sinks.

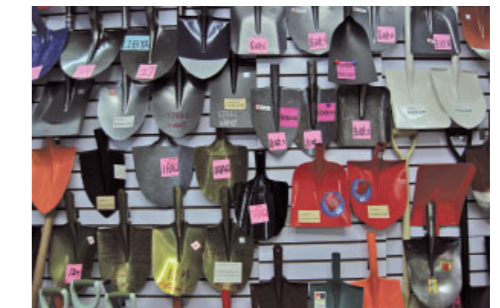
Love and Hate in Mumbai

Invited as guest professors to participate in a workshop, we once again felt the collective had much to learn rather than anything to impart. We were immediately suspicious of the grassroots, NGO, poverty glorifying approach. No more surveys. 'In order to be good you have to be evil' was to be our take on what must surely be the most densely inhabited slum in Mumbai ... in India ... in the world.

What if a trumped-up top-down approach has a better chance of succeeding than a genuine bottom-up one? Can research targets be explored with fictional tools?

Although Supersudaca embraces bottom-up strategies, we felt that politeness from all sides (curious architects versus humble inhabitants) would cloud the issue, masking any real wishes or needs on either side. In the first place, what were we actually doing there?

An article found on the flight in *The Economist* entitled 'Rising Slum' helped orient us. It described Dharavi's complexity, mega congestion and how people are incredibly busy recycling Mumbai's garbage. Yet what impressed us even more was the discovery that the speculators' price tag for the slum starts at US\$9 billion! Our task was to disguise ourselves as developers with the aim of seducing the inhabitants with the promise of high-rise apartment life post-slum. At the end no one was nostalgic for his or her picturesque neighbourhood; instead they were curious about the renders illustrated in our spurious brochures. In any case the slum dwellers should know they are sitting on top of a gold mine that only looks like garbage. Private initiatives seemed more effective than well-intended state interventions. Change is certain and fast, and everybody wants to be a part of it – it's got all the dynamism of Bollywood choreography.



Bangladesh is the most densely inhabited country on earth. When one imagines density one thinks of congested urban realms; however, hyper density here in countrywide terms means rural density.

below: Putra Yaya – Malaysia's newly built government city – strangely plays host to the most diverse collection anywhere of streetlamps per hectare. To each block its own lamp design; likewise every government building has its architectural style. Malaysia is truly Asia.

bottom: Phnom Penh is emptied out in 1977. A few years later people slowly return. Only some have houses to go back to, most take anonymous apartments; the weakest take the last option, cultural buildings such as churches or pagodas. The worst dwelling proposition has to be a cinema: a favela with a dark roof becomes the living space for dozens of people. The tragedy continues 33 years later.

opposite left: Exact (yes, exact!) scale replica of Singapore at the Urban Redevelopment Center. The ultimate urbanism theme park.

opposite right: Promotional material from the Supersudaca workshop in Dharavi. When slum dwellers became aware of the enormous value of their land, they happily gave in to imagining the same kind of future as your local eco developer.

Home of one of the great archaeological wonders of the world (the temple of Angkor Wat) with 400 kilometres (248.5 miles) of coastline and coral reefs. Yet its turbulent still exerts a powerful break on the country's future. The real horror for Cambodia lies in ignoring its potential.



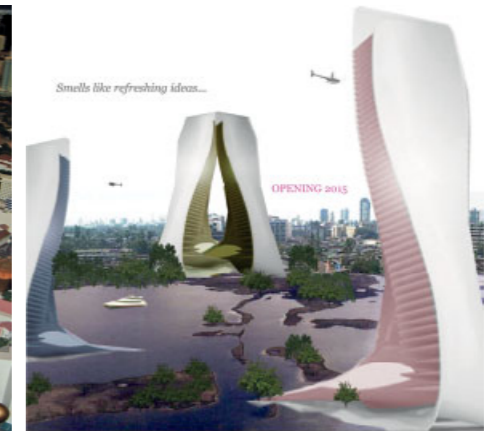
DhakaKhan

Bangladesh is the most densely inhabited country on earth. When one imagines density one thinks of congested urban realms; however, hyper density here in countrywide terms means rural density. Even though Dhaka – the fastest-growing megacity in the world – is super-chaotic and dense, it is similar to other Third World cities that expand at random. What makes the impact is when one travels through the country; when one experiences the sheer amount of people everywhere one goes. Nowhere is there 'nobody'. And programmatical mix per hectare is astonishingly high; rice paddies, fishponds, villages, brick factories with their tall chimneys, more villages, more rice paddies. Land is an ever scarcer commodity after every monsoon season ... within such a context we were reconciled with an old master, Louis Kahn's parliament building. A magnificent contrast that makes so much sense in its isolation and boldness. The masterstroke we learned? The grand gesture is the way forward in an incredibly unstable, heavily fragmented environment.

Cambodiasyndrome

When we got to Cambodia, its complex history of wars, revolution and genocide finally became more comprehensible: not just Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge, but Americans (Kissinger; Nixon), Vietnamese, Chinese. The country was in the wrong place at the wrong time (viz the Vietnam War) just at what should have been its brightest moment (King Sihanouk and modernisation). Dragged from its rural Marxist utopia, its people were forced to abandon Phnom Penh in a hurry. When the city was reoccupied, incomers settled in the abandoned buildings regardless of their former uses, so temples, schools, cinemas, etc turned into micro neighbourhoods. Formerly private corridors and stairways became public streets. Architecture became urbanism.

A tuk-tuk (motorised rickshaw) culture had emerged: a city made out of small reversible elements set against a hard background. But so too a new wealthy class of triumphant generals emerged: the Lexus culture of big cars and beautiful young escorts again. Speculation on a vast scale, ballooning



real-estate prices, corruption that ties land concessions to private capital; the country's geography is being transformed (lakes drying up, land reclaimed from the river).

Yet the outside world only knows about this place when they wear a T-shirt. The reality of our 'Made in Cambodia' clothing is to be found in the textile factories that proliferate on the outskirts of Phnom Penh attracting enormous numbers of female workers who arrive by the truck load. History in reverse. Cambodia is perhaps too conveniently located in the heart of Southeast Asia, neighbour of booming Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia. Home of one of the great archaeological wonders of the world (the temple of Angkor Wat) with 400 kilometres (248.5 miles) of coastline and coral reefs. Yet its turbulent still exerts a powerful break on the country's future. The real horror for Cambodia lies in ignoring its potential.

Singapore Amnesia

From Kuala Lumpur we arrived at Singapore. Somehow it seems hard to recall any street or name from Singapore, probably because the English toponym confuses it all, or maybe because there's a strange scale disorientation effect: a country, a city, a neighbourhood, a building compressed into a single visual experience. Like a big scale model. And of course in this ideal Lego city it is forbidden to leave any trace of mess, so no chewing gum, no smoking, no jaywalking. Here, where supposedly hybrid programming projects were finally realised, there is an awkward and seductive feeling of stability. Our invitation was to the Urban Redevelopment Center, a place where planning actually works and is proudly demonstrated even in amazing interactive games for school kids.

Planning meets Pixar. It seems to work like this: some urban concern is raised, a competition might be opened to the best qualified professionals and the winning scheme triumphantly publicised. Then it is painstakingly built and officially inaugurated. In the Center's centre there's a huge model of the city; it bears a quite shocking resemblance to the real thing. Just so you can see for yourself, they've even installed a periscope so you can check with the outside how similar they are. But wait! There are buildings missing ... or pieces. Those are the

upcoming projects to be finished in a perfect cadence of timing. A unique, strangely anonymous experience; one impossible to forget but just like the models: the streets have no names.

China tu madre! China Your Mother

We arrived in China with little background knowledge but a wish list that included playing ping pong with Chinese masters, having a foot massage, and finding out where everything is actually made; we wanted to see if you can really feel the 1m300 million people.

We were directed by our hosts to the epicentre of our every wishes and particularly in two cases we caught a glimpse of what we can already see happening in our part of the world. Yiwu and Thames Town were examples of contrast and power. Yiwu is the biggest market in the world, hosting 100,000 shops that sell quite literally everything from around the world. The most important alongside the most trivial items, from Christmas decorations to surveillance cameras. Everything that you have in your house comes from Yiwu.

Thames Town, or James Town as we called it, is the epicentre of a brand new 970,000-inhabitant city just finished and half empty. James Town is English style and could be part of any London area with its red telephone boxes, brick houses and old-style traditional pubs. We couldn't stop imagining the contrast between a Latin American politician proudly opening a new library and a Chinese one opening just another brand new 1-million-inhabitant city.

Nowadays there are endless combinations of nation groups – G-2, G-7, G-8, G-20, but the one which is really missing is G-ALL minus the 7. Maybe If we could circumvent the usual triangle where Europe and the US play the central role, Latin America, Africa and Asia could learn and profit from each other in several and surprising new ways.

An insider joke is that Supersudaca is slowly becoming a travel agency. The most frequent question we are asked after lectures is: 'How can I become a Supersudaca?' It seems everyone wants to join the tour. ▢