



NORDISK ARKITEKTURFORSKNING

Nordic Journal of Architectural Research

1-2018

**THEME ISSUE:
TRANSFORMING
SITE METHODOLOGIES**

Nordic Journal of Architectural Research

ISSN: 1893-5281

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5.5 Euro (for individuals who get access to the journal through institutions).

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Outside the Nordic countries pay in Euro to SWIFT-address: PGS ISESS Account no: 4190325-3, Postgirot Bank Sweden, SE 105 06 Stockholm.

Published by SINTEF Academic Press

P O Box 124 Blindern, NO-0314 Oslo, Norway.

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^{*)}This is an interview. It has not undergone the same review-process as the scientific papers.

Photo on the front cover: Shelley Smith. *Relief – plaster and pigment*, Shelley Smith.

SITES AS SUCH AND DEVELOPING METHODS

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR JOAN BUSQUETS BY
SHELLEY SMITH AND VICTOR ANDRADE



Professor Joan Busquets is an internationally renowned urban designer active in academic and professional capacities. He holds professorships at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and at the Technical University of Catalonia. His professional practice, BAU – B Arquitectura i Urbanisme, is based in Barcelona and designs include new urban centres, the

reconstruction of old and neglected urban areas and the development of infrastructure and participation in the strategic design for the cities of Den Haag, Lisbon, Marseille, Rotterdam, Singapore, and Sao Paulo. In addition, Professor Busquets is the author of many influential articles and books, including *Barcelona: The Urban Evolution of a Compact City* (2005), *New Orleans: Strategies for a City in Soft Land* (2005) and *Cities X Lines: A New Lens for the Urbanistic Project* (2006) and the curator of topical urban exhibitions. For more information see: <http://www.bau-barcelona.com/inicio>.

We met Professor Joan Busquets following his keynote address at the 2013 research seminar “Transforming Site Methodologies” to discuss his professional, research and teaching experience working with the transformation of sites, the nature of sites and how the notion of “a site” figures in “the work”.

SS & VA: Could you say something about the role the site plays in your work? Is it for example, a demarcated geographical area, a layered potential or are there certain particular ways that you see the site?

PROF. BUSQUETS: The site is a very important part of the context. I would say that it is perhaps the most important part of the context. Usually in urban design and architecture, the context has always, in my eyes, historically been assimilated with the buildings and the morphology – the traces of the city, the history of the city, all of those things that the site was usually confronted with. But this lacks the reading of the site as a question including topography, also having special conditions, I mean, qualities, for example water – those elements are very, very important. In fact, I always feel a project can always be seen as a sort of re-interpretation of the site. I feel the most interesting projects are the ones that use the site, that put the site inside the project as part of the project, but at the same time, that create new conditions for the site and for the environment next to the site. For example, the publication we did about Seattle regarding the Weiss/Manfredi Seattle Olympic Sculpture Park (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 and 2
Seattle Olympic Sculpture Park project designed by Weiss/Manfredi (2007) was awarded the Veronica Rudge's Green Prize in 2008, and published by Prof. J. Busquets. Located on a post-industrial site that encompassed a 12 M vertical difference between the city and the waterfront, the new zigzagging sculpture park reconnected the cityscape with the waterscape.
For more information, see: <http://www.weissmanfredi.com/project/seattle-art-museum-olympic-sculpture-park>.

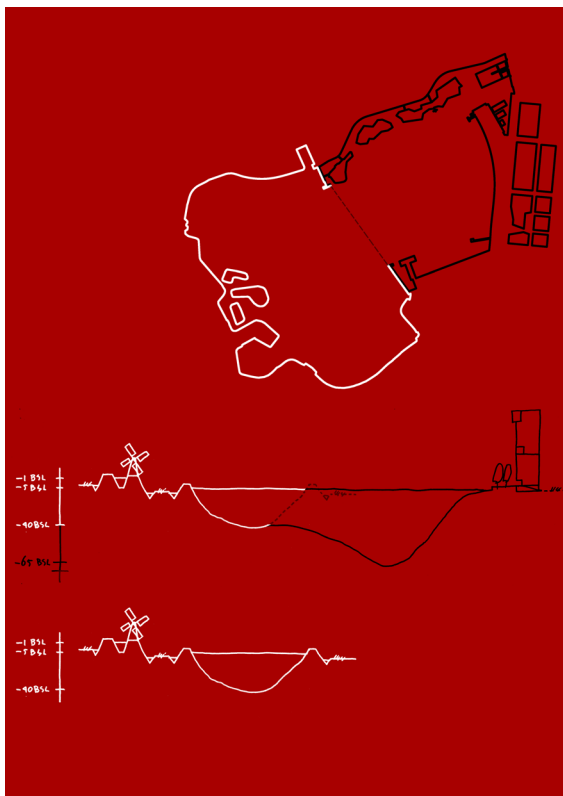


This project really makes – creates the site – the site does exist – it was just left-over space – in fact the project created the site. But we can also say now that because this site is successful – this re-interpretation of the site has expanded over the rest of the area. We can see that the real estate is changing – that is a way of showing how the site can become more interactive in a way.

SS & VA: Does the site have transformative character then?

PROF. BUSQUETS: Absolutely. I think this is the right way of considering the task. But again, when the project takes the site seriously and makes it a part of its own programme and part of its own advantages – enhancing the site – the project can then also become stronger. Sometimes we feel the project is like an object placed on a site – I don't think this is ever true, but when the project is really embedded into the site or the site is part of the project, both things gain. Even with architecture in flat conditions, the urban intervention can modify this. A project that we did in Rotterdam, Nesselande (Figures 3 and 4) – it was the first time I had worked on a project where the land didn't exist. It is one of the reasons we took the project – it was the first time in my life that I didn't have anything to look at because it didn't exist. I remember walking in that place and you felt that the site didn't exist because it wasn't yet created. Of course, later there are other reasons for creating better conditions, but in the beginning, we tried to alter the topography to create a sort of beach. It seems impossible in the beginning, but later it became the major success of the region.

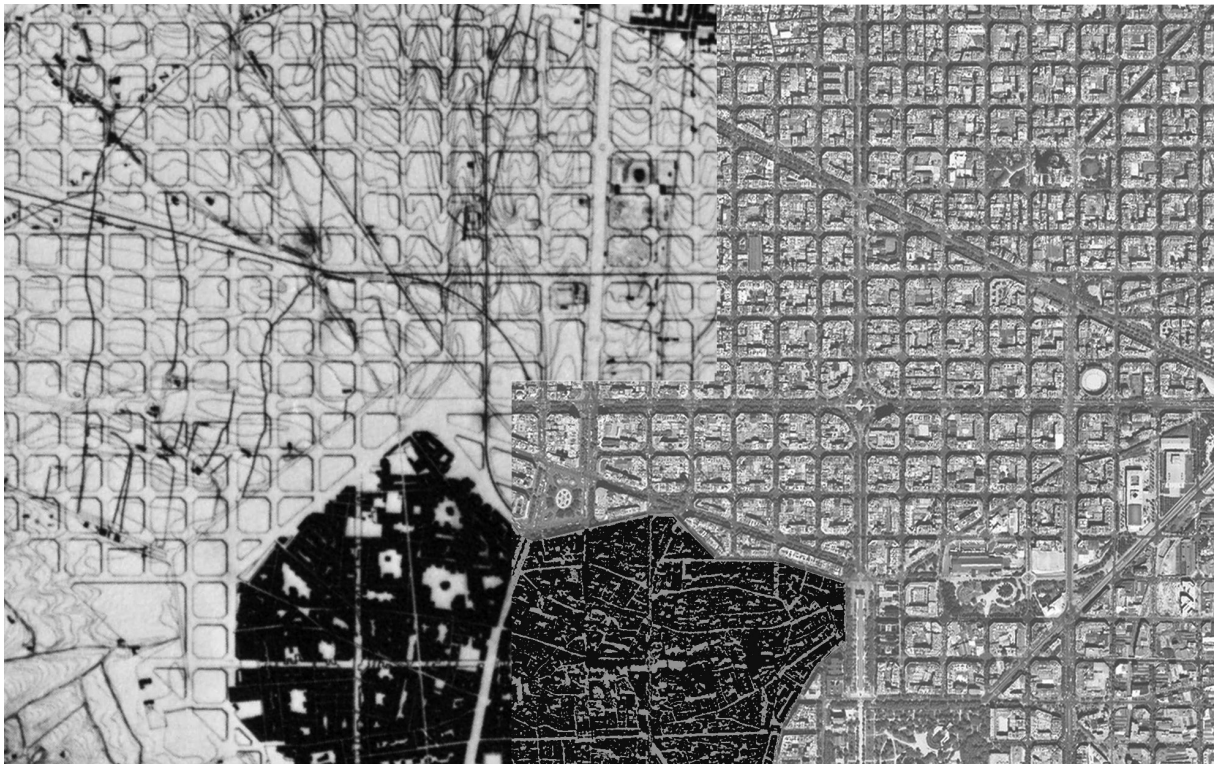
Figure 3 and 4
Nesselande, Rotterdam. The book, *New Civic Center. Nesselande, Rotterdam, The Netherlands*, from 2011, chronicles this project that reclaimed land from the polder in order to obtain a lake and a new soil platform for the new neighbourhood.



SS & VA: In the initial seminar description, we asked, “How can we work with sites in a contemporary situation that are characterized by time playing as much of a role as space, by movement and change and by place not necessarily staying in place?” This alludes to a “transientness” and a complexity of different aspects. How can we work with sites like that? How do you see these particular challenges?

PROF. BUSQUETS: I think that this is the way contemporary design is. But I feel that this is very much in the history of design, probably what happens today – buildings that were designed about 20 years ago – they are parts of large and ambitious projects – they are designed to happen at once, but they don’t really have the budget – like the Cèrda grid in Barcelona – it was done 120 years before it was finished. See Figure 5. See also Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 5
Cèrda grid, Barcelona. The grid designed by Ildefons Cèrda in 1859 was initially criticised for being too uniform and monotonous. This plan of repetitive blocks, built and filled in over time, proved to be incredibly robust and allowed for extreme variety in layout within the block structure, and the buildings and green spaces that comprise it.



This guy was able to imagine any programme, any idea of what the city would look like. And I think this is the question – the way that we design certain strategies, the way that we design certain parameters – then we allow things to happen. I know that this is not usually the way we as architects prepare – we like to see everything, to imagine every single corner of a window but we have to accept that in some cases we are designing things and strategies to allow cities to develop, to allow programmes to fit in... I think we have to be generous in that respect. If we want it to become an object I think it is better that we design this type of thing. Then that is very good you can see the process, you can see the

problem, you can sell it. This is another type – this is more industrial design. But when you intervene at the scale of the city, the decisions that you help make – they take a lot of time, they will also engage other flows, other positions, but the power of urban design is that it is able to resist – it is able to be adaptable to some changes, without being demolished. We have been working free-lance for the city of Den Hague in the Netherlands, for approximately 15 years. One of the projects we did – for the redevelopment of the downtown – when you look at the first sketches and the realities, you can trace the way that the project resists and the way that the project adapts see Figures 6, 7 and 8).

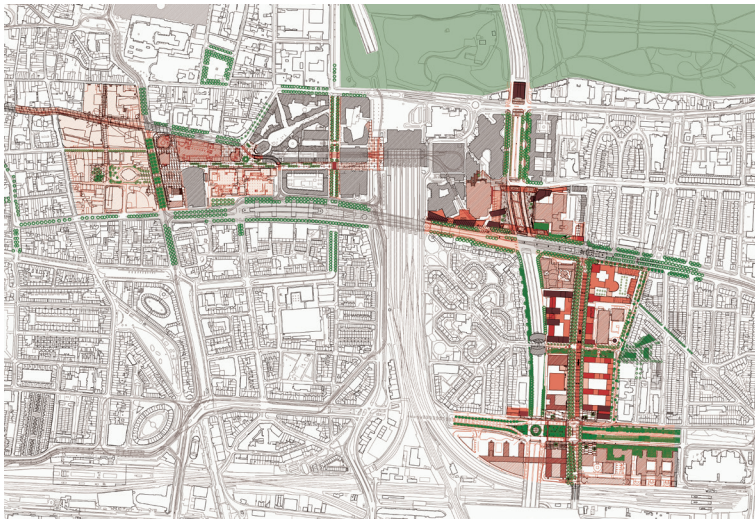


Figure 6, 7 and 8
Redevelopment project for Den Hague – downtown area (1992) including several Masterplans, urban design and open space proposals. Published in the book *Six Projects for Den Haag*.



I think this is what urban design is about. That is what is variable. It means that Urban Design is a certain abstraction of the city – we tend to imagine that Urban Design is about modelling in 3D at 1:500, this is not true. You are modelling certain geometries, but better than this, certain relationships between things, between certain capacities of flows, you don't always know exactly of what, if it is only bicycles or whatever – but these things can come later. That is the reason that our interpretation of the city is very much about the logic, about the geometry, about the rationale, about how things relate to each other which I think is another story – one that isn't just the volumes, the surfaces and the programmes – which was another tradition. I learned from within this tradition, but then I discovered that with this you cannot go so far.

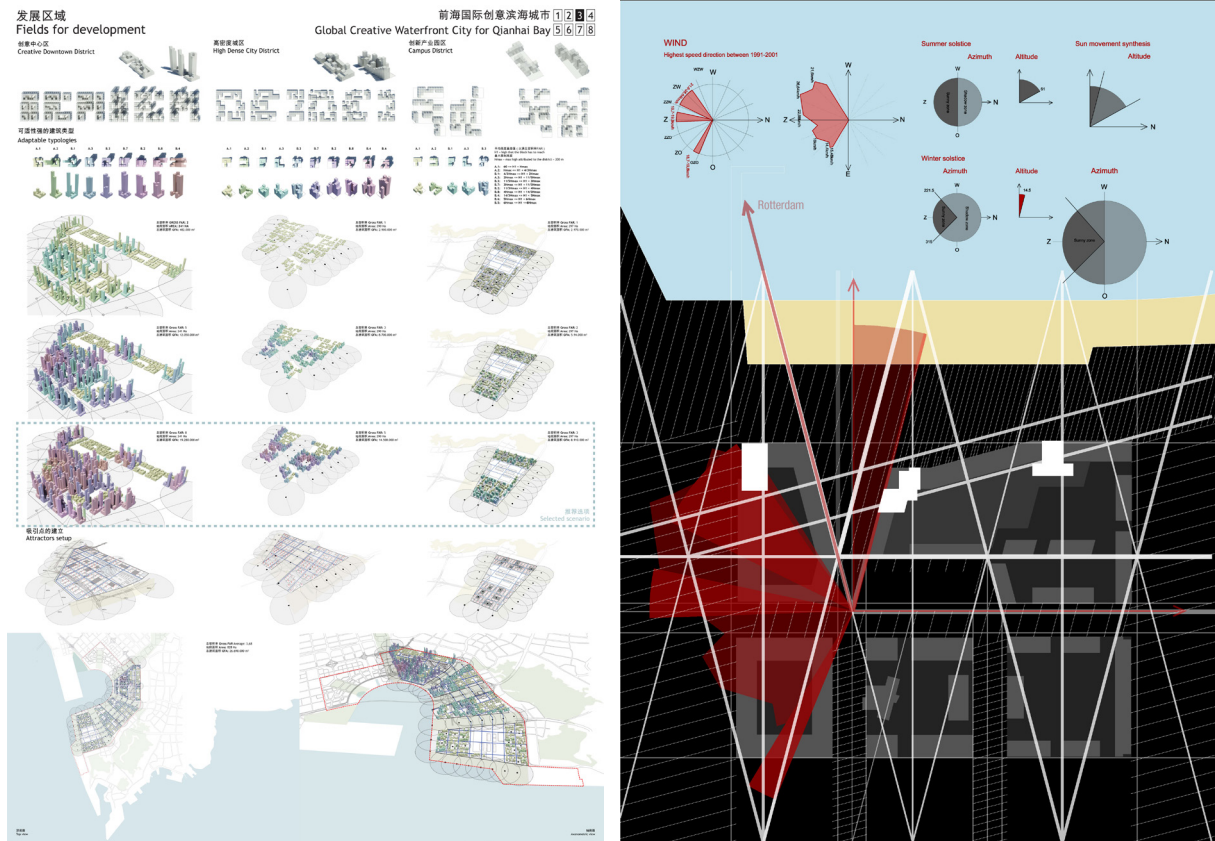


SS & VA: When you mention that it is about the logic and the determined parameters, do you work with parametric design?

PROF. BUSQUETS: Yes. But in perhaps a different way. In the Nesslande project in Rotterdam I mentioned, we tried to introduce this idea – how you can facilitate mixed-use – but you don't know where it will be located. What parametric software allows us to do is to simulate many different options and I am pretty sure that with that we will be able to bring other solutions to the table that other we and other architects then can use. I also like in these complex projects to be involved as an architect. That's the only way you can test your strategies about the standards and the parameters, otherwise it is very difficult. I think that it makes the process more complicated. It is very difficult to be only a researcher, or only creating the ideas and not being a 'part of the cake' ... For example, when you have a strategy – that is fine, but it doesn't work – you have to show that it works... This collaboration project for the masterplan of Shenzhen QianHai Bay (Figure 11) was very nice because we were involved in the development along with a Dutch architect and a Danish architect. The funny thing is then – of course Dutch architects are very powerful and sure of themselves as you can imagine a few years ago – how you can have a dialogue that when you look at it, you can see that there are 3 different hands, but in the end, you can see that the 3 are playing together.

Figure 9 and 10 (see also Cèrda grid in Figure 5)
The Cèrda grid in Barcelona – spatial variations in the block. Recovered and refurbished courtyards, for example

I think that this is the main struggle of the urban designer – to be able to get everybody in – to be able to understand that some of the arguments – even from your side – can make some changes to the product. ...even developers. Developers have to have a say within the logics, but not that we have to do what developers want. That is the big difference.



SS & VA: Is that difficult? I've found in my own experience that developers have the argument that they have the money. So, you have to come with good arguments ...

PROF. BUSQUETS: ... and we have our brain and the money of the developer cannot have that. It is a small power. I think that you can feel that you can get a certain point across – and the funny thing in this project - it is built - this project is wholly privately financed and today the city is presenting this project as their project. That means that the city – and the city was watching the project, paying attention to it – the city was also helping in the discussions to support our position – but in the end the developers are happy of course, because they get their money. I think this is something about Urban Design in the 21st century – we don't have the power to impose everything, but we have the power to lead things in a reasonable and 'right' direction.

Figure 11 (left) Shenzhen QianHai Bay consultant conceptual proposal (2010). The work for the masterplan was developed by a team of 3, put together from the 8 finalists from the competition to design. Fig. 12 (right) Nesselande, Rotterdam.

SS & VA: So, you see that as a success that the city presents this project as their own?

PROF. BUSQUETS: Absolutely, Absolutely. And the people are using it. It attracts people from other regions to this place. I mean this is a part of the power of urban design – that we are able to create a value for people. That you could say the housing with certain values makes more money – yes of course we know that – but if we are able to get it into the programme and to the right people that is fine.

SS & VA: You talked about the site resisting and adapting. With these words, it seems to make the site come alive, become a kind of living organism. Is that a fair assumption to make?

PROF. BUSQUETS: Sure. I think that urban design, planning as well, have to be clear enough that people can understand, they can share and that can resist time. That is the difficult question related to that. Urban design has to be very ambitious – but if it is urban design fixing everything – urban design is not going to last. That is the problem in Europe and many other places, it's the same. You have to bring certain elements then people can say "Okay, I can live with that. And here I can do this and that ...". Then it can just resist. That is what happened. I think this example in Barcelona, the Cèrda grid, is very good, because it is already very old, but in the end, it's there. Of course, everything has changed a little bit but it's there. You can still recognize it from the drawing – nobody has doubts about that.

SS & VA: In that context, would you see a difference between urban design that is resilient and urban design that is adaptable?

PROF. BUSQUETS: No, I think it should be both resilient and adaptable. But adaptable doesn't mean flexible. No. Adaptable means that it can adapt to different conditions. Like the Cèrda scheme. He was probably imagining that all of that would be mostly housing. But it's not mostly housing. And that's better. I think this is the power of urban design, that in the end the outcome is better. You know, we curated an exhibition about this: *Cèrda and the Barcelona of the Future – Reality versus Design* (Figure 13). Our hypothesis was that the reality is better than the project – and then we proved it. Everyone criticised me saying that the project was good in the beginning, but I said, "Let's look at that and let's confront that." If it is all the same – what do people prefer? People prefer that they go here and there – this is a little bit denser, it was better with different flows – and I think the power of the urban designer is this – the best urban design scheme in the world is able to understand completely what the reality is going to be. You have to allow a certain adaptability within clear rules and this will make that the final product will most probably be better than what we were thinking – even if we are the best in the world!



SS & VA: Regarding the programming of sites, we often talk about, for example in the design of public spaces, that you don't want to "over programme". That you want to give clues, but don't want to programme too much, because then you are determining how spaces are supposed to be used and thereby limiting. Bringing this back to the Cèrda grid, my understanding was that it was conceived of as a structure – a block structure – but that there was a looseness about this seemingly strict structure. That it could be built according to the needs of different times – that some could be open and some be higher.

PROF. BUSQUETS: Yes. I think regarding public space there are different circumstances. I'm saying that in general terms. In certain circumstances the public space needs to be very precise in order to have an informative effect. In other places as we saw nearby in Aalborg at the waterfront – when you don't really know what to do, you can put fields for people to play and that can start creating something. There are different strategies and it is important that students of urban design learn that we have to be precise in certain circumstances and in others you have to be relatively loose. What you have to do is make that space "work". And then after 20 years, 50 years, 10 years – nobody knows - that will perhaps need a second project, or third project in order to become more precise. This is very important. Sometimes you can see that urban design needs to be very precise because you can really assume what will happen. In other places – for example if you are designing a campus you can make

Figure 13
The exhibition curated by Joan Busquets, *Cèrda and the Barcelona of the Future – Reality versus Design* (2009), CCCB, Barcelona. Looking at how the plans laid out by Cèrda were developed and how this reality could be one even better than what could have been imagined.

certain assumptions in the beginning about what kind of spaces there will be, but what will happen in 20 years or 50 years – no one can imagine. We can't consider what new generations will do. If we understand these different logics and these different realms, it is very rich – but it is very difficult. Because then you can say “What do you mean? Do I have to be strict or not?!” Our students have to have the capacity to say “We are in *this* situation”, and then to convince the client – either in private or public – “and here we have to be specific for these and these reasons”.

SS & VA: This is very interesting seeing this the other way around as well. We have talked about the challenge of projects being implemented over quite a long period – about the adaptability and the resilience of site transformations – but in your book *Cities X Lines*, you present a taxonomy and one of the strategies that you present is *Tactical Maneuvers* (Figures 14 and 15), where minimalism is one of the main qualities of the strategy. Could you say something about this?

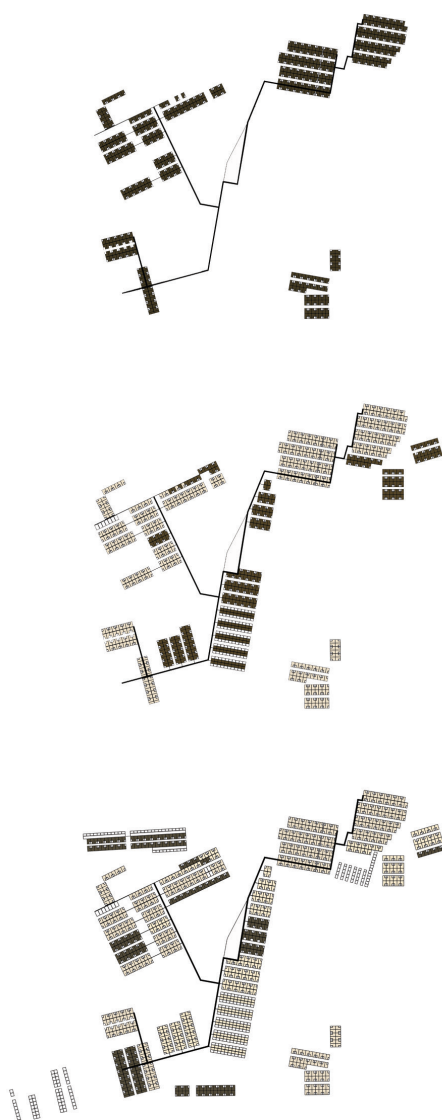


Figure 14 and 15
Tactical Maneuvers – an urban development strategy named in the Prof. Busquets' book, *Cities X Lines – a new lens for the urbanistic project* (2006) – research done in collaboration with Felipe Correa. This strategy is driven by a notion of minimum critical mass, i.e. seeing the potential in the least amount of intervention. The example shown here is the Malaguera Housing Project in Évora, Portugal by Álvaro Siza (1977–1998). This residential area is efficiently organised by an infrastructural spine.

PROF. BUSQUETS: My point is that in almost any circumstance, except a city that is within a war, in any city you can do some actions. Even if they are very minimalistic but that can create a process that can grow later. My argument regarding the minimalistic – I like very much the minimalist attitude – to say “OK, we can do that, that and that” – that doesn’t take a lot of money, it doesn’t require a lot of risk but you start the wheels moving. This happens in many cities. I think it is good that also students understand that we can do these kinds of things. And that you have to be very skilled at choosing – and it is more ludic. In other strategies, you have more capacity – you can say we’re going to build an opera house here and then make a big show. I mean that’s another story, but then you can use the opera house to do something else, to start another process. We use these different methods to show the types of potential.

SS & VA: Your book is such a useful tool to even just start talking about the “urbanistic project”, as you call it. I think with societal changes and the changes in the way we built in urban development, that we haven’t really even known how to talk about it. We’ve used older methods.

PROF. BUSQUETS: I agree. Also, students can see that there are plenty of possibilities. And in fact, a lot of people say “Urban design – what is urban design? Is it about models, what is it?” I think presenting these strategies as examples helps. You can like this one or that one – be in favour of one. I think this is the reason for this book, for pedagogical reasons – to bring them into this discourse in a way. Now I am more interested in going a little bit further in terms of how we can learn to do better practice. This is very important. It is important that our students in the end know not only the distances between the buildings and the car, but also in terms of the proportion of that in terms of the next. I mean the city is not about the design – otherwise it would be a handbook “The Design of a City” – it’s not about the handbook, it is something else. My job is not deciding whether it’s the same colour, many colours. Another story I am very interested in is about the strategy in terms of the form of the city. It’s not the strategy in terms of the politicians – even though that too could be interesting – but the strategy about how you can be able to define in a given condition. If you start with introducing new facilities, is that the question or is it more a question of use, or is it a question of the housing, or is it a question of requalifying the buildings? Or if it is more in terms of the people that they already get certain skills about the form of the city, about how they can be advised? I mean it is people in the end that we and our students are going to be advising. Advisors of local communities, of central governments, developers. These people are the people that they will be able to engage with a certain rationale and the others will listen to them to decide if what they said makes sense.

SS & VA: To follow up on that, you mention in your book about emergent urbanistic cultures and what kind of urban conditions have been intriguing the contemporary urban designer. You wrote that some years ago – but I am curious to hear from you whether you think there are any new emergent cultures or what intrigues you right now in your practice?

PROF. BUSQUETS: I think that urban design sometimes has to look at the short-term reality, but that it is more a mid-term view. You can see today, if you take European examples, there are new issues on the table – like questions of mobility of comfort in the city. People want certain individual freedoms, but they also like the way of using public spaces - but also we should design what is happening in the buildings. There are new patterns that we have to explore – deeply – with research because if we don't then nobody will follow us. But you can see that these things are changing and you can see now with all these movements – for example the urban ecology movement - all these things are put on the table and require attention – but that doesn't mean this is going to change everything. But we have to accept that there are new elements to take into account. For example, if you re-planned a sector 20 years ago, what would the priorities have been? With transportation and cars – how would you integrate this? Today we are more preoccupied with the continuity of the green, with the continuity between pedestrians and cars where it is possible. These things change to a large degree how we organise the city. Today we have more of a focus on how we walk the city, how we see the city. Before, it was not this way. That changed certainly in Europe, but I think everywhere. Those are the things we have to put into our agenda for cities. But I don't think this means we have to turn everything upside down. No. We have to take these things up. And we need to re-think projects – like the Cèrda project, or any other project. It could be in Germany. It means we have to look with the eyes of what are the people asking us to do.

SS & VA: If we talk about change – society has changed, everything is in constant change – and all of this seems to be moving extremely quickly. We sometimes have a tendency to look back - we still talk about Kevin Lynch and Gordon Cullen, look back to methods from the 1960's or 70's. We have talked quite a lot about developing new methods. I think that comes about from feeling a *need* because there is so much change and a questioning of how much these older methods are in sync with what is happening today in contemporary societies. I think your *Cities X Lines* book has helped a lot to talk about our methods, to attach a vocabulary. Do we need new methods? Can we talk about a toolbox that has to do with a contemporary urban situation?

PROF. BUSQUETS: I don't feel that we can establish a precise method. That would be a dream and everybody would be very happy! We need several methods – and students and young professionals must be

prepared to understand what the right tools are for specific circumstances. We have to prepare professionals that understand tomorrow we are going to work here, after 10 years we are going to be more landscape oriented – or even politicians. We have to enable people to be able to work and more than a toolbox; I feel we have to revise methods and create methods that can read realities and from the reading of realities, be applied. We have to invite our young people to better understand the tools that are already available. That is the most important thing. We have very powerful tools but we always use the rather banal things from the 60's because they are easier. I mean we just line up the blocks – but there are more elements. And this is the reason I think we have to revise – and it needs a lot of work – there is a lot of work to be done. But I feel that it is a panorama that I am very optimistic about – it is very rich. I mean the field is gigantic and we cannot cover it all but when you take people interested in the existing city, how you can conform, how you can enrich, they can practice some things – for example people confronted with extension. We in Europe don't like to talk about that, but this is a reality. The world is still growing. Some say this is a question of the 60's – it's not – the world is still growing. People say we need other tools – yes, we need other tools but I remember once I was giving a lecture in China – and they asked me my advice. They said, “We have to build 5 million dwellings in the next 5 years. What is your model to do that?” It was a real question.

Transforming Site Methodologies was a seminar and PhD course held at the University of Aalborg September 26th and 27th, 2013. During this 2-day event, a list of national and international urban researchers and practitioners visited the research seminar as speakers the first day, while the second day was devoted to the presentation of papers given by PhD students contributing to this field through their current research projects. The event was made possible, and realized, through funding from the Center for Strategic Urban Research and the Utzon X lecture series at Aalborg University.

We would like to thank Professor Busquets and his office, BAU B. Arquitectura i Urbanisme, and Francesc Baqué from the office for generously providing us with the images in this interview, and the permission to use them. We are very grateful for this.

