

Fragilities

Studio Urban Field Lab

Proposed framework

Studio UFL (Urban Field Lab) deals with acute and profound **societal, politic, economic** and cultural **transformations** for which alternative spatial responses are sought. Last year, the studio ran under the heading 'Territories, Fragilities and Ingenuity'. This year, in light of our new collective reality, we revisit the framework with a focus on ***fragilities***.

The current pandemic in which we find ourselves, has turned cities inside out. It has **rocked our certainties** and raised our sensitivities. Care homes, hospitals and job centres have finally caught our attention and we have seen or experienced the injustices that we may have previously chosen to ignore or that we deemed far remote from our lives. It has reminded us of our own frailties, and the precarious nature of our live settings. Small things have become big things. Bird song audible in our streets. The first take-out coffee after lock-down. A strange alliance of poetry and danger has filled our gasp. In state-ordered confinement, we have mimicked the life of the elderly, the frail, the injured, the unemployed, disenfranchised: a home not to return to but to remain in. In some cases, we have unexpectedly joined them.

If anything, **the current crisis has amplified many of the fragilities** and urban challenges the studio has dealt with over the past years, from the precariousness of our health and care systems in the wake of unprecedented demographic change (a long-term concern of the studio), to urban inequalities, unaffordability of housing, the increasing disappearance of *free* (public) space (substituted by commercialised space), ailing infrastructures, the scaling down of public funds, declining environments, the mono-cultural footprint of 'empty' density institutions, to name but a few. These pressures – that have not gone away - **challenge conventional conceptions** of urban planning and space-making and redefine our disciplinary roles and frameworks, prompting us to find novel and **alternative ways** to create spatial territories.

Fragilities rarely derive from singular factors or come in neatly objectifiable entities; instead, they are mostly **entwined into a complex multi-scalar forcefield** characterized through a simultaneous acting of diverse social, cultural, economic, environmental, political factors that criss-cross and interlace global, national, regional, interest-based, personal and intimate scales, linking the personal and individual to the societal. Dissecting relationships

that impact on the spaces that we all inhabit, demands a working methodology that criss-crosses scales and disciplines.

Importantly, fragilities do not only lead to stark statistics and bold headlines, but they have **a real bearing on the everyday lives of citizens**. It is here, where the term becomes painfully 'alive'. In *Studio Urban Field Lab*, we recognize this fact by going 'into the field' in order to understand how things play out 'on the ground' in the daily life of people, employing ethnographic methods to dissect lived space.

Despite the sorrow, the pandemic has also provided us with **an opportunity to reconsider many so-called certainties and commonplaces**, giving rise to a renewed interest in asking fundamental questions that attempt to redress certain balances we may have lost. How do we want to live? What are our values? What do we want and need *in* and *from* our cities, villages, offices, schools, hospitals, homes, streets, neighbourhoods, public spaces? What could alternative care systems look like? Which precarious relationships have we set up? If the current pandemic has amplified inequalities, it has also shown us our resilience to deal with the situation ad-hoc, in often much more un-bureaucratic and ingenious ways than thick-system official strategies that are slow to react. The unusual circumstances have led us to put rigid codes of behaviour to one side. Goats in the streets. Music from balcony to balcony. Tables, deckchairs and paddling pools on pavements. Dinners in doorways. Swimming in rivers... Delight in despair? Might fragility bring out humanity? If yes, what can we learn from this?

What we will do

If you join Urban Field Lab, you will need to **challenge known ways of working** and understanding and embrace diverse and unfamiliar methodologies and knowledge fields across disciplines, including for example, **ethnography**, economy, politics, urban geography, health, sociology and art. The studio is research driven *throughout, including* the design process.

You are invited to propose your own field of interest, agendas and contexts within the **overriding framework of fragilities**. We intend to collectively benefit from the rich international backgrounds and cultures you all bring to the table. For those of you who prefer a more collective starting point, the context of South-East London could serve as an alternative common seeding ground for your projects (but bear in mind possible restrictions on field trips).

Rather than creating another set of spatial doctrines, the ambition of the studio is to harness dormant opportunities and capabilities, picking up left-overs, making alliances, grafting typologies, crisscrossing territories, using hidden resources to infuse the status quo. We seek to **bring fresh opportunities, delight, humanity and care**. The studio is not interested in template standardised responses but demands a project with far greater scope, combining multitude of fields and ambitions, breaking new ground. We ask questions through **critical practice** and reflection, by exploring spatial opportunities and by committing to comprehensive, rigorous and deep research. This will seamlessly lead us to

coherent, comprehensive and original urban and spatial projects worked out to a high standard in all scales.

Studio ethos

Studio Urban Field Work works in a truly multi-scaler manner, often working simultaneously in contrasting scales, from the remote to the close-up, the global, national, regional, city-wide, localized, inhabited, but also the personal, intimate, close-up scale, **linking everyday life experiences of people, to wider urban systems**. The **urban condition resides in all scales**; with the close-up personal scale being deeply connected to larger urban forces and vice versa (Hall, 2012).

Contrary to mediated or abstract space, **lived space** tends to be more contingent, **messy and incoherent than our theories and abstractions**. **Ethnographic tools** will help us to engage with **lived space**, permitting us to map differences between analytic data and actual explorations. Whilst the current situation makes this slightly more challenging, we will continue to scrutinize and understand how particular fragilities play out in actual circumstances.

We use drawings, physical models, films, immersive techniques, installations and explorations as a *tool* to drive a rigorous, critical design process, *not* to represent or illustrate. The creation of microscopic as well as supersize forensic, detailed drawings, models and mappings which chart complex urban, spatial, social, environmental and cultural phenomena as well as unorthodox everyday occurrences forms an integral part of our daily working methods, creating high-standard work throughout.

The study and critical reflection of complex texts and theories across disciplines is a key driver to which you need to commit.

The Master Thesis is a unique opportunity to embrace a complex project that brings a sense of depth and rigor to the table and that is critically and creatively astute.

The studio is intense, complex and demanding but also rewarding.

Looking forward to working with you.

Anuschka Kutz, August 2020.

Any questions, please email: [Anuschka Kutz](mailto:Anuschka.Kutz@KU.Leuven.be)

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