

# THE POLITICS OF DESIGN

a collection of working papers by doctoral  
researchers in the LSE's Cities Programme

citiesLAB  
volume 2

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## **citiesLAB working papers, volume 2**

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## Contributors

### **Corinna Dean**

Corinna graduated in architecture from the Bartlett School of Architecture and practises as a writer and curator. Her PhD research in the Cities Programme, collaboratively undertaken with Tate Modern, is entitled 'Establishing the Tate Modern Cultural Quarter: Regeneration through art and architecture'.

### **Jamie Keddie**

Jamie's PhD thesis explores the impact of gentrification on long-term residents in Bermondsey, South London. He works for a social enterprise which supports communities to design and deliver housing and health services.

### **Daniel Kilburn**

Daniel graduated in Geography at the LSE. His PhD research in the Cities Programme explores experiences of everyday life in mixed-tenure housing schemes in East London, with a focus on critically examining the aims and outcomes of 'mixed communities' policies.

### **Attila Szanto**

Attila graduated from the MSc City Design and Social Science in the Cities Programme at the LSE, before completing his PhD on 'Narrating the Urban in Contemporary Budapest'.

## Preface

citiesLAB has emerged from collaboration between PhD students at the LSE's Cities Programme. The Cities Programme is an interdisciplinary graduate centre bringing together a diversity of expertise and approaches to the study of the city. The citiesLAB workshop reflects that diversity and includes architects and designers, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and planners, with a common interest in understanding the interplay between the social and the spatial in contemporary cities. The product of this collaboration is both a working group and a set of common projects to focus our explorations. citiesLAB has grown from the need for regular communication between students engaged with the solitary nature of doctoral research, towards a forum in which we regularly discuss our work and present ideas.

The Politics of Design is a compilation of working papers that focuses on different forms of 'design' in the city – from the design of policies to that of buildings and public spaces - and considers the ways that these practices and processes of design are implicated in various kinds of politics, both official and informal. This is the second volume in the citiesLAB series, based on our ongoing discussions and the development of a shared intellectual project out of the individual work of the doctoral researcher. The principle of collaboration – the exchange of ideas and the development of work in progress – is central to the ethos of academic life.

**Corinna Dean, Jamie Keddie, Daniel Kilburn, Attila Szanto**

## Introduction

### The Politics of Design

Cities make the workings of politics and power visible in very concrete terms. But the physical expressions of authority, influence, conflict and control are not always easy to read. The architecture of authority and of dominance may take brute physical form – in the triumphal arch or the presidential palace, the military headquarter or the corporate skyline – but politics and power shape urban environments in more subtle and less legible ways. This is in part because buildings, infrastructure and public space offer material answers to social and economic questions that rarely have a single or straightforward solution; questions that are not settled by physical interventions, however overbearing, self-confident or categorical these may seem. And physical interventions – alienating housing environments, divisive roads and railways, exclusionary public spaces – in turn produce social and economic problems of their own.

In the writing, reading and talking that makes up the citiesLAB project, we have been struck by the ways in which quite different strands of work engage critical aspects of a 'politics of design'. Some of these politics are more explicit than others, but all involve issues of conflict, contestation and control. The very idea of politics is grounded in the figure of the citizen and the space of the city, and the papers collected here are all concerned with the ways in which 'everyday' forms of urban citizenship – and especially the rights of the resident – are claimed, imagined and represented. The notion of design in play here, meanwhile, goes beyond overt attempts to build or engineer spatial and social outcomes – although the collection addresses some of these strategies – to include more broadly the ways in which social interests, political ideologies and economic objectives shape the cities we live in at very local as well at larger scales.

The four papers that follow fit together both in terms of how they differ and in what they have in common. The key difference is that of scale: each contribution explores the politics of design at a different spatial level. Daniel Kilburn's paper, on the rationalities at work in the design of 'mixed communities', offers the clearest instance of a formal politics of the city, one that seeks to *design in* diversity in the production of mixed-tenure housing in London. It focuses at the scale of a single housing development, the everyday environment of a group of residents that at the same time embodies a much larger set of political objectives and techniques. In his piece on public space in a gentrifying part of London, Jamie Keddie examines how socio-economic shifts in the city shape different varieties of public realm. In his contrast between the 'square' and the 'gardens' – one a recently designed space in a high-value new development, the other a refurbished space in a social housing estate – Keddie points to how the 'displacements' involved in gentrification can occur within very local geographies. Corinna Dean's work on the Bankside area moves the discussion to the scale of the urban quarter, as a fragmented locale is re-made as an urban destination. Dean considers the ways in which culture, marketing and speculation intersect in the valorisation of urban space and the creation of preferred urban narratives. Finally, Attila Szanto takes us to the city scale, as individuals seek to embed memory and meaning in a rapidly transforming urban scene, this time in post-socialist Budapest. His piece reminds us of the movements in scale that living in the city always requires, as he seeks to understand large changes to the urban fabric through the 'subjective strategies' of individuals.

This touches on the critical theme that all four papers share. Each writer is concerned with the politics of change in the contemporary city. From the local scale of housing regeneration, to neighbourhood effects of gentrification, to a nation and a city in transition, these processes of change raise questions as to who gets to make urban futures, how urban citizens live with shifts over which they may have limited control, whose vision of the city shapes the designs of policy, architecture and economy. If politics, as Harold Lasswell famously described it, is about 'who gets what, when, and how', then the urbanist must add – 'and where'.

## **Fran Tonkiss**

Director, Cities Programme