



Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjou20>

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To cite this article: Francesca Piazzoni, Jocelyn Poe & Ettore Santi (2022): What design for Urban Design Justice?, Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability, DOI: [10.1080/17549175.2022.2074522](https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2022.2074522)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2022.2074522>



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Published online: 01 Jun 2022.



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What design for Urban Design Justice?

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ABSTRACT

Emerging theories of *Design Justice* ask architects and planners to center the voices of long-oppressed groups. But which kinds of spatial transformations can concretely inform a just praxis of urban design? To answer this question, we *compare-in-difference* how disadvantaged people counter exclusion by designing spaces in Baitu (China), Los Angeles (USA), and Rome (Italy). We find that diverse groups activate similar spatial logics in order to resist erasure and displacement: they carve out possibilities, take ownership of space, and break dominant aesthetics. These logics help us identify three design pathways that can detach technical knowledge from the interests of oppressive forces. Supporting ground-up claims, but at the same time using their trained skills to facilitate decisive, long-term transformations of space, we propose that professional designers *Situate Possibilities, Exclude-to-Include, and Reject Aesthetic Canons*.

KEYWORDS

Urban Design; Design Justice; professional praxis

1. Introduction

Urban scholars have long established that the form and appearance of built environments can amplify injustices. Within the same city, urban forms reinforce distinctions between a city of those who have, where spaces are produced and maintained for the elites, and a city of those who have not, where underprivileged groups are confined and subordinated further (Talen 2012; Tonkiss 2020). These uneven geographies did not materialize overnight. They speak to decades, sometimes centuries of oppression that powerful actors have inscribed into built forms (Schindler 2014; Rosenberg 2020). Opportunities to access and use spaces continue to privilege the needs of some (usually white, probably male and straight), while designating “undesirable” groups as “others:” edge populations forced into a physical and social condition of marginality (Lipsitz 2011; Mitchell 2013).

But can urban design also help fight injustice? This question has received a great deal of attention over the past decade. And, while design alone cannot solve systemic inequities, a consensus has emerged that spatial transformations should seek to reverse uneven power dynamics (Loukaitou-Sideris 2020; Low and Iveson 2016). Theorists of the *Just Urban Design* framework have urged architects and planners to facilitate the spatial practices that edge-populations deploy in order to counter exclusion (Goh, Loukaitou-

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Sideris, and Mukhija 2022; Vasudevan and Novoa 2021). Parallel to debates in architecture and planning, the *Design Justice* movement has interrogated the field of design studies more broadly. Here scholars and activists have highlighted how design processes reproduce inequities across multiple contexts (from computational to spatial design), and have committed themselves to dismantling this trend by adopting an intersectional, Indigenous, queer-feminist lens (Costanza-Chock 2018, 2020).

These concomitant efforts have engendered a new paradigm for *Urban Design Justice*. At the heart of this paradigm is the need to overturn spatial orders that make services and opportunities out of reach for unwanted people, supporting those people in using and producing space however they like. While the need for more equitable place-makings has been widely acknowledged in theory, however, in practice justice-centered efforts tend to translate into small-scale, temporary projects. Pathways for advancing Urban Design Justice through more enduring, ambitious transformations of space remain to be traced. Such a gap is problematic because it risks exacerbating already tense distinctions between the theories of urban design, which focus more and more on questions of equity, and the ways professionals operate on the ground, which often end up reifying uneven distributions of power (Loukaitou-Sideris 2012; Tonkiss 2017).

This paper explores what kinds of design pathways can inform a transformative praxis of *Urban Design Justice*, moving beyond small-scale, scattered, and ephemeral interventions. With praxis we indicate the process through which theories are transformed into actions aimed at making the world a better place, even if only in small ways (Anderson 2014; Cruz and Forman 2020). By no means do we act in a void, as we build on expanding efforts to conceive justice-centered practices across design fields. After clarifying our contributions to these debates, we explain *comparing in difference* as a method that can help reveal common logics by which oppressed people seek to make a city their own. We introduce the three cases of Baitu, an ethnic minority village in China where small farmers face displacement by state-led developments of agribusinesses, Los Angeles, where residents of the historically Black Crenshaw District fight a new rail line, and Rome, where immigrants eke out a living by selling trinkets on the street. These groups experience deprivation in different ways. Yet, each of them experiences oppressive processes of othering, in which dominant groups deploy social categories of race and ethnicity to exclude “the other” from societal benefits and privileges (powell and Menendian 2016). Because of this shared experience, the cases we discuss typify how the othered – the underprivileged, oppressed, and marginalized – face spatial oppression imposed by governing expertise along racial/ethnic lines.

We consider the spatial responses enacted by these groups to counter oppression as just urban designs. We interpret design as the process through which people, together with non-human forces, produce physical and social spaces. At times, this production concretizes through material elements that change the physical organization of a place. At other times, design articulates through ephemeral appropriations of space that do not change material arrangements directly, but which are nonetheless transformative of the ways by which people use and interpret their surroundings. In every case, design is always political as it imbricates with relations of power, tangibly affecting the distribution of opportunities and rights that diverse groups can access in a society. Urban design may equally unfold in highly stratified urban centers, such as in Rome’s tourist areas, in peripheral suburban dwellings, such as Los Angeles’ Crenshaw district, or even amid the

extended rural territories of China's Hunan province. In this sense, we interpret "the urban" expansively, as a process of socio-spatial transformation i.e. interwoven with the accumulation of capital, and which extends well beyond the bounded space of cities (Brenner and Schmidt 2015).

Following this interpretation, we find that people in Baitu, Los Angeles, and Rome deploy similar logics to design spaces in the face of power: they carve out possibilities for profit and political resistance; they take ownership of space by activating subversive relations of property; and they break dominant aesthetics by making their bodies and practices visible where they "should not be." While refusing design as a governing form of expertise offered to "empower" oppressed people, we suggest that the insurgent designs of our cases point to three pathways that professional designers can adapt to specific contexts. We propose that architects and planners *Situate Possibilities* (co-designing projects that give control to oppressed people, possibly proposing scenarios those people may have not yet imagined), *Exclude-to-Include* (unapologetically prioritizing the needs of marginalized groups at the cost of excluding others), and *Reject Aesthetic Canons* (by partnering with marginalized groups to inscribe their aesthetic taste and belonging into built environments). Far from complete, and certainly amenable to further interrogation, these pathways suggest pragmatic steps for designers and planners to advance a form of justice that reverses the spatial implications of othering.

2. An emerging framework for Urban Design Justice

Scholars remain skeptical of deploying physical design to tackle injustices, and with good reason. Urban theorists have long traced the exclusionary effects of twentieth century modernist planning, when architects believed they would "improve" societies by imposing "universally ideal" urban forms (Holston 1998; Sandercock 1998). Debates in feminist, cultural, and queer studies further critiqued Western-centric constructions of expertise, arguing that such constructions fail to recognize the situated knowledges (Haraway 1985) that cooperate in the production of space (Bennett 2010).

Theorists and practitioners since the 1970s sought to reject white, male, heteropatriarchal standards of who is a "normal" user of space (Sedgwick 1990). While calls for more inclusive design practices have permeated theoretical discourse, the spatial outcomes of these efforts have often ended up reinforcing uneven power relations, de-politicizing conflicts, and masking deeper injustices (Douglas 2018; Tonkiss 2017). These circumstances have led some to call naïve, if not simply wrong, attempts to address inequities through urban design (Brenner 2017; Sorkin 2009). Indeed, critical urban scholars tend to portray architects and planners, at worst, as capital seekers solely interested in creating signature buildings at the cost of exacerbating inequities (Sklair and Gherardi 2012; Tafuri 1973). And, at best, as entrepreneurs who well-meaningly reproduce injustices by means of "superficially engaged" projects (Comerio 1984; Crysler 2015).

Yet there is more criticality within the field of urban design than prevailing narratives would have us believe (Grubbauer 2019; Talen 2009). Well aware that physical design alone cannot terminate injustices, scholars of the built environment have examined the socio-political implications of design in the context of global capitalism and increased inequities (Cuthbert 2007; Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998; Low 2000). They have agreed that, precisely because built forms interweave with larger dynamics, spatial

transformations not only can, but also should seek to reverse unjust relations of power. People's ability to access and use spaces mirrors their right to the city, or the ability to participate in the social and political production of the societies they live in (Lefebvre, 1968 [1996]; Purcell 2014). Planners and architects should seek to entitle everyone to this right (Hou 2010; Crawford 2011). Moreover, considering how multiple lines of oppression take away the ability to use spaces on the basis, e.g., of one's race, gender, and physical ability (Fincher and Jacobs 1998; Sandercock 2003), scholars have urged urban designers to especially support these publics in accessing, using, and producing spaces (Rios 2014; Roberts 2017).

The emergent framework of *Just Urban Design* brings together these calls for more equitable urban forms (Goh, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Mukhija 2022). Embracing the always-political implications and processual nature of design, critics have called for spatial transformations to blur distinctions between "experts" and "users," acknowledge overlapping scales and temporalities, reinforce indigenous and collective forms of ownership, engage with more-than-human agencies, and empower oppressed groups by facilitating their practices (Cruz and Forman 2020; Roberts and Kelly 2019; Vasudevan and Novoa 2021).

Critical here is to stress that these theorists do not refuse the utopic nature of design: they acknowledge that design requires formulating a vision of how spaces should look. It is the political uses that urbanists make of these visions that too often perpetuate injustices (Sandercock 2003). In other words, it is not necessarily problematic for professionals to use their technical knowledge to realize envisioned spatial arrangements. What makes the difference is whose visions they help realize and whose interests they advance. Architects and planners become agents of domination every time they promote plans that do not center the voices, interests, and imaginations of marginalized groups. Seeking to reverse this trend, the *Just Urban Design* framework requires professionals to put their creativity in the service of oppressed people in order to systematically, and intentionally privilege their interests (Goh, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Mukhija 2022; Loukaitou-Sideris 2020).

Parallel to these debates, another strand of inquiry has examined questions of justice within the broader field of design studies. Here scholars and activists have drawn from perspectives in anthropology, history, as well as science and technology to interpret design as a social force (Dovey 2008; Holston, Issarny, and Parra 2016), and one that involves human and nonhuman agencies (Rabinow and Marcus 2008; Escobar 2017). Rejecting normative interpretations of expertise, critics have called for designs that produce real social transformations by addressing socio-economic inequities, global warming, water and food shortages, and many other sources of injustice (Hunt 2011).

The *Design Justice* movement has recently brought these debates together, opening new spaces for action through an intersectional, indigenous, queer-feminist lens. Scholars and activists of the movement have highlighted how design processes reify oppression along intersecting paradigms such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism. Considering design professionals as facilitators who should open up possibilities rather than prescribe "solutions," people in the *Design Justice* movement call for processes that support the self-empowerment of oppressed groups by building upon knowledges and practices that already exist within communities (Costanza-Chock 2018).

The movement has elicited practical experimentations in a variety of fields. For example, digital artists Ill Weaver and Wes Taylor designed the line of apparel *they/them*, which provides gender nonconforming individuals with opportunities for aesthetic self-identification. Similarly, the collaborative installation *Beware of the Dandelions* uses workshops to gather stories of community resistance in Detroit, and then recasts these stories into digital audiovisual performances that interact with broader urban publics (emergencedia.org). And entrepreneur Denise Shanté Brown initiated *Design for the Wellbeing of Black Womxn*, a practice of collective mental healing that counters the white masculine design of conventional mental health techniques (deniseshantebrown.com). While the *Design Justice* movement has mostly influenced digital media, fashion, and product design, its advocates have also called for giving more attention to spatial inequities (Costanza-Chock 2020).

Scholars and activists in multiple disciplines, then, have highlighted how design and power are never disentangled from one another, calling for deploying design as a force for social change. When it comes to the design of built environments, however, the kinds of spatial transformations that can systematically inform a praxis of *Urban Design Justice* remain underexplored.

To be sure, important attempts have been made not only to theorize, but also to operationalize justice-centered approaches to the built environment. Going beyond critiques of design as a ubiquitous means of domination, and working with communities to co-produce knowledge, scholars have established several pathways to forward equitable urbanisms. Critical pedagogies represent one such direction. Educators have sought to nurture the “capacity of care” in the classroom (Baptist and Hala 2009) by exposing students to their social responsibilities as future professionals, organizing exchanges of knowledge with local communities, and encouraging projects that prioritize equity and self-empowerment (Cruz and Forman 2020; Sletto 2013; Till 2020). Another area of experimentation is substantiated by professionals who use their expertise to reveal injustices and highlight opportunities for insurgency. There are several illustrative cases, such as the initiatives of groups like Forensic Architecture – which uses spatial analysis to reveal human rights violations (forensic-architecture.org), the Decolonizing Architecture Art Research group (DAAR)—which shows hidden legacies of colonial dispossession in the built environment (decolonizing.ps), and the Street Vendors Project – which assists informal vendors in using spaces amidst urban regulations (issuu.com/golfstromen/docs/vendor-power).

Finally, and importantly for our argument, scholars and professionals have proposed urban transformations that can help reverse exclusion. Frameworks such as Tactical Urbanism (Lydon and Garcia 2015), Spatial Agencies (Awan, Schneider, and Till 2011), DIY Urbanism (Douglas 2018), and Guerrilla Urbanism (Hou 2010) have become popular platforms for centering needs and voices that often remain unheard, if not purposely ignored. Proposing collaborative, open ended, and usually temporary transformations of public spaces, these frameworks have operated at different scales: from small, low-cost re-appropriations of underused spaces, as in the work of Taller KEN to revitalize the abandoned spaces of Playa Chomo in Guatemala City together with residents (tallerken.info); to institutionalized, larger interventions like the re-design of Mariahilf, a neighborhood in Vienna which was transformed to facilitate the routines of women, children, and older people under a “gender mainstreaming”

agenda (Bauer 2009); to urban schemes such as the Superilles in Barcelona, where several maxi-block have been semi-pedestrianized and refurbished (ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles).

Criticisms of tactical urbanisms *et similia*, which we refer to as *Tactical Urban-isms*, have progressed in parallel with their popularity. A common critique denounces the de-politicization of tactical interventions which, having become a brand in themselves, frequently reproduce inequities and push away the very groups they claim to benefit (Mould 2014; Franco 2018; Spataro 2016). Another area of skepticism has contested the ephemeral, “small-scale” ambitions of tactical operations which, in the name of (justifiably) avoiding any form of spatial determinism, de facto oppress comprehensive aspirations, failing to dismantle the roots of unjust systems (Iveson 2013; Tureli, 2013).

Embracing these critiques, scholars and activists have, on the one hand, defended *Tactical Urban-isms* as potentially useful in assisting ground-up claims while, on the other hand, have advocated for recuperating ambitions through the design of more decisive, durable, and normative transformations of space (Hou 2020; Loukaitou-Sideris 2012, 2020; Goh, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Mukhija 2022). Such an approach can be substantiated by generalizing guidelines. Low and Iveson (2016), e.g., have proposed that just urban design processes should “*redistribute resources, recognize difference, foster encounter/interaction, establish an ethic of care, and ensure procedural justice*” (p.12, emphasis original). Some practitioners have begun to operate in this direction. Artists and architects of the Black Reconstruction Collective, e.g., have moved beyond marginal interventions to propose collective and radical transformations of our built environments aligned with the Black Radical Tradition (blackreconstructioncollective.org).

It is these structural and comprehensive intentions that our work seeks to forward, moving beyond small-scale, scattered, and ephemeral design activisms to recuperate a more ambitious, cohesive approach to *Urban Design Justice*. We firmly reject one-size-fits-all formulas and believe in hyper-contextualized, ground-up spatial operations. But we also believe that such operations could be guided by general, concrete pathways for dismantling geographies of oppression. These pathways emerge from the insurgent designs that people *already* enact as they counter exclusion across the world. To identify pathways for a praxis of *Urban Design Justice*, we examined how oppressed groups seek self-empowerment by designing spaces in Baitu, Los Angeles, and Rome.

3. Comparing in difference: a method for Design Justice

We did not plan our investigations together. In this respect, we diverge from conventional forms of comparison, which discourage measuring dissimilar places against each other (Ragin 1989). We decided to write this paper after carrying out research independently, as we realized that the validity of our reflections lies precisely in the similarities that emerged amidst our methodological and personal differences. The three of us do share a background in architecture, and predominantly rely on qualitative methods. But each explored a different phenomenon, looked at a different regional context, and embodies a different positionality. And the groups each of us engaged with also experience exclusion in different ways.

After collecting data individually, we asked whether each of our cases revealed any theme relevant to the theory and practice of design justice and, if so, if there were any overlaps among these themes. We systematically reviewed our data and discussed findings together. We found that different groups across the world activate similar spatial logics as they carve out possibilities, take ownership of spaces, and break dominant aesthetics. We suggest that these similar spatial logics, which surfaced amidst differences between researchers and contexts, provide a departure point for fruitful generalizations.

We believe that embracing the differences of each case, but also cutting across such differences to identify and build on the cases' similarities, can help set a transformative direction for the praxis of design justice. *Comparing in difference* reveals how power structures operate through similar logics across radically different geographies. This method draws from critical debates in comparative methodologies that broadly reimagine comparison as "thinking cities/the urban through elsewhere" (Robinson 2014) and understand the complexities of comparing across racial/ethnic groups (Goldberg 2009). It also draws from Hart (2018) relational comparison as a means to understand how urban processes relate in contexts where power hierarchies determine spatial outcomes in ways that reveal possibilities for social change.

Comparing in difference can reveal the spatial responses by which ethno-racialized, gendered, classed, and normo-abled people counter oppression across the world. These responses, which we identify below as *insurgent designs*, can help delineate what kinds of interventions architects and planners may put forward to support spatial justice. As we build on insurgent designs to trace pathways for professionals, we espouse Simone's (2012) methodological imperative to "research the research" which posits that, by learning from how marginalized populations research the world, we can forward solidarities and collective actions without erasing differences. To illustrate comparing in difference as a method for design justice, we now move to introduce the three cases of Baitu, Los Angeles, and Rome, as well as our different positionalities within such contexts.

3.1. Baitu

In 2014, the Chinese central government launched the *Beautiful Countryside* program to install large-scale agribusiness in rural villages across the nation. This program grants village officials funds for renovating infrastructure such as roads, irrigation canals, electric lines, and warehouses. In exchange, villagers must agree to give up their right to use farmlands and transfer them to a single, often state-owned agrarian firm. This scheme aims at achieving national food independence through agrarian corporatization, while increasing local governments' control over farmlands. As farmers lose access to their previously assigned land, many are left with no choice but to turn into waged workers. At the same time, while dispossessing families from their farms, local governments attract agribusiness investors, increasing their economic power against competing local state agencies (Hsing 2010).

Santi analyzed the spatial responses of Baitu villagers to the Beautiful Countryside development plan since 2018. Located on top of a steep hill in northeastern Hunan province, Baitu is a Bai and Tujia ethnic minority village. Besides introducing corporate

farming, the Beautiful Countryside program aimed at constructing Baitu's official ethnic identity. The business plan conceived of displacing small farmers to install a large plantation of *Bayuegua*, a wild fruit growing spontaneously in the surrounding forests. The state-owned company planned to hire villagers to sell the fruit to tourists of a nearby national park, by marketing it as "wild" (rather than farmed). Associating the notion of the wilderness to both the fruit and the ethnic subjects who would sell it, the company would brand farmed crops as "authentic."

The reconfiguration of Baitu's agrarian environment (from a small-scale family farming system to a large state-owned agribusiness) elicited multiple design responses from villagers. Villagers built fences around their land to make their ownership visible, planted crops on unused land to continue their farming business, and constructed discourses that delegitimized the crops farmed by the agrarian company. Santi analyzed these design responses over the course of seven months. He attended daily meetings with architects and planners working on the Baitu's project, collecting design plans and sections, drawings, invoices, funding certificates, and business plans. Santi also conducted observations and interviews with Baitu farmers, exploring their spatial practices and perceptions of the Beautiful Countryside program.

Santi's research was affected by his privilege as a white, US-based researcher. Because of this position of power, villagers saw him as inextricably connected to the local government and, at first, hesitantly released information to him. At the same time, architects, planners, and state officials rarely considered him to be a full part of the team, treating him with ambivalence. While in the field, Santi sought to embrace this status of non-belonging, using it to navigate complicated political circumstances, approach unheard people, listen to their stories, and counter the narratives advanced by oppressive actors.

3.2. Los Angeles

In the U.S. as elsewhere, transportation infrastructure has often been a tool to achieve spatial domination among communities of color. City and county authorities subjugate, restrict, and displace Black bodies and spaces to achieve efficiency and public good for other city users. Because these actions saturate Los Angeles's histories, residents were outraged, but not surprised, when Los Angeles County Metro Transit Authority (Metro) announced the Crenshaw/LAX addition to the light rail transit systems. Metro's plan to route an at-grade line through one of the few remaining historically Black corridors of Los Angeles signaled that not much has changed since the 1960s, when the Santa Monica freeway devastated and erased Sugar Hill, a prominent and thriving Black neighborhood.

After years of abandonment, multibillion-dollar investments in Crenshaw Boulevard brought tangible fears of erasure and displacement for those who have occupied – been redlined to – the area since the 1960s. Even if they were originally constricted to place through racialized homeownership legislation, restrictive covenants, and exclusionary zoning (Redford 2017), many long-term residents have made Crenshaw an "at home," a place of cultural belonging (Hall 2017). Erasure

fears were solidified when Metro released urban design renderings with no Black people, places, or art. Metro had reimagined Crenshaw as a place with no trace of Blackness.

Poe explored how community stakeholders resisted this intentional, systematic removal of Blackness by negotiating their presence into the design process. Through activism and place making, stakeholders obtained the opening of the new Leimert Park metro station and birthed Destination Crenshaw, a 1.3-mile public art project aimed to permanently mark Crenshaw as the Black culture district of Los Angeles. Poe entered the site as a researcher, a resident, and an urban planner engaged in the planning activities changing the neighborhood. She attended neighborhood meetings, community organizing events, and informative sessions as a participant observer and observing participant. As a resident, she walked Crenshaw's streets, shopped and ate at local stores, and interacted with neighbors. Poe wrote field notes for the formal meetings and documented casual conversations that emerged as a result of living in the area. Additionally, she performed a content analysis of data about Destination Crenshaw found in meeting minutes, blogs, and news media outlets.

3.3. Rome

Millions of tourists visit Rome every year, eager to experience the histories of power that movies and books have told them all about. Italian administrators and market actors have long capitalized upon these narratives. Beginning in the postwar period, and more decidedly since the 1990s, welfare cuts, privatizations, and pro-decorum regulations have turned the city center into a playground for tourists and elites. As in many parts of Italy (Dines 2002; Quassoli 2004), visible migrants are widely considered inappropriate users of historic Rome, and daily face public hostility, racialized policing, and hostile regulations. The same iconicity that favors the marginalization of racialized migrants, however, is also instrumental to their survival. Roughly two thousand immigrants every day occupy touristic public spaces to sell cheap toys, shawls, and flowers. Most of these vendors are men from Bangladesh, followed by people from Senegal, China, and Eastern Europe. Selling without permits or regular immigration statuses, vendors risk from fines of over 5,000 euros to deportation.

These vendors are not passive captives of oppression. They challenge exclusion by appropriating and repurposing spaces. Piazzoni analyzed these dynamics by focusing on the relationships that Bangladeshi vendors constructed with Rome and its other inhabitants. Following preliminary visits to Italy and Bangladesh, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over 10 months. Methods comprised observations of public spaces (including two police stations), interviews with 28 Bangladeshi vendors, interviews with other users (29 police officers, 13 people who worked in the area, and 12 residents), and 100 face-to-face surveys with tourists.

Vendors were initially recruited through convenience sampling on their vending locations. Interviews occurred outside of working hours in a space chosen by each vendor. As a white Italian working in the US at the time, Piazzoni embodied several privileges that inevitably affected her relationships with respondents. Especially at the beginning of fieldwork, some respondents might have avoided criticizing Italian police, edulcorated their housing conditions, or chosen not to reveal their hiding

spots. After a few interviews however, as Piazzoni's position of solidarity became clear to the vendors, respondents helped her recruit other interviewees among colleagues and friends. Most of those later interviews took places in other locations, including the respondents' homes and prayer rooms. Some vendors began trusting Piazzoni and asked her, e.g., to translate documents, hide merchandise during police raids, and negotiate with police officers.

4. Insurgent designs

The cases of Baitu, Los Angeles, and Rome span geographical and conventional urban-rural divides. They occur in political contexts where both the role of the state and approaches to property rights diverge to an extreme. And they illuminate patterns of oppression that exclude people along diverse social categories. Yet, we find that these groups challenge exclusion by activating similar insurgent designs: they carve out possibilities, take ownership of spaces, and break down dominant aesthetics. These insurgent designs do not necessarily materialize in similar ways across geographies. Indeed, as we show below, they articulate differently in each case.

4.1. Carving out possibilities

Carving out possibilities to use otherwise hostile environments is one way by which people design spaces to counter oppression. Scholars have shown that, while designated "experts" tend to impose exogenous solutions that reproduce inequities, marginalized local groups transform spaces through much more competent knowledges that mirror a deep understanding of the forces at stake (Escobar 2017; Vasudevan and Novoa 2021). Below, we show how people deployed their situated design knowledge to carve out spaces for economic benefit and political resistance. This happened in Baitu, where farmers reclaimed abandoned lands after losing their farmlands, in Los Angeles, where Crenshaw's residents mobilized against Metro to increase traffic to legacy businesses, and in Rome, where immigrants repurposed built environments to sell on the street.

4.1.1. Carving out possibilities in Baitu (relocating farms)

Baitu officials tried to convince villagers to transfer their land to the agrarian company. Many villagers, however, refused to give away their farm in exchange of a waged work. Instead, as compensation, they asked for a same-sized land plot located away from their home, in an area that had fallen underused on a nearby hill. Farmers cleaned up their new land from the ferns, reconnected the water canals to the nearby pond, and plowed the soil for fertility. Rather than planting rice, which they deemed to be more appropriate for the terraced fields downhill, they decided to grow corn and sweet potatoes, which were more suitable for a drier ground and which villagers could sell for cash. Corn seeds enabled farmers to feed pigs and chickens to be sold at the local markets.

Carving out spaces for economic possibilities on the abandoned land on the hill, Baitu villagers reclaimed new production areas. They maintained part of their land-based income while "accommodating" the corporate farm downhill. To be sure, many villagers

obeyed the government plans and turned into seasonal workers. But they nevertheless relied on partial financial security provided by farming and animal husbandry in the newly acquired plots.

4.1.2 Carving out possibilities in Los Angeles (improving access to Black businesses)

As construction for the new rail began to disrupt car flows and limit access to storefronts, one of the central goals of Crenshaw's stakeholders became protecting "legacy" businesses and preventing their closure. By informally carving out space on the sidewalk and street corners, brick and mortar businesses made their services and goods more accessible and visible on the construction filled streets. Additionally, while architects and planners usually associate minimal parking with "good" streetscape design, residents fought to keep existing parking to ensure access to businesses. Pavement design also served to advertise shops and restaurants, and strategically-placed advertisements pointed to business entrances where construction impeded previous signage. Finally, residents initiated regular street festivals specifically designed for black business. These festivals were held in the famous Leimert Park Square and Plaza, a public space often underused. In creating spaces for alternate approaches to buying and selling goods, legacy businesses were largely able to sustain economic vitality during rail line construction.

4.1.3 Carving out possibilities in Rome (selling on the streets)

Selling on the street represents one of the few accessible means of survival for poor migrants in Rome. Vendors distributed over eighteen streets, nine piazzas, and three elevated panoramic terraces, carving out spatial opportunities in the heart of the touristic center. Vendors repurposed pavements and sidewalks to delineate trading spaces; turned balustrades into ready-made stalls; and appropriated streetlights and outdoor heaters to turn dark, cold corners into inviting trading stations. These abilities to carve out possibilities amid extremely precarious conditions were also reflected in the vendors' housing choices. To reach work quickly and avoid encountering police in public transit, most vendors rented bed spots in overcrowded basement apartments just a few blocks away from iconic landmarks. Other affluent residents in those buildings usually ignored—or chose to ignore—the vendors' presence. Seeking to go unnoticed, vendors refrained from cooking, avoided showering or using toilets at night, and did not spend time in the streets nearby the building.

4.2. Taking ownership of space

Unwanted city residents assert their urban legitimacy by taking ownership of spaces: through spatial practices that alter unjust property structures and challenge dominance from within (Blomley 2004). The subversive relations of property enacted by oppressed groups concretize in spaces of belonging that dismantle naturalized regimes of ownership (Keenan 2015; McKittrick 2006). While these spaces of belonging are always political because they unsettle existing power structures, they do not necessarily reflect similar intentions to confront power. As we show below, if Baitu villagers surrounded farms with fences to assert individual ownership over collective land, and Crenshaw residents

occupied spaces in opposition to the Crenshaw/LAX line, the contingent spaces of belonging created by vendors in Rome speak to the need to get by, more than to an intentional confrontation with power.

4.2.1. Owning space in Baitu (fencing farmlands)

Some families who were able to keep part of their original farmlands built fences to mark their property. Wealthier villagers surrounded their land with prefabricated metal railings while lower-income families used concrete blocks or wood sticks. These enclosures emerged as physical and symbolic acts to claim private possession over their farmlands, excluding the public domain of the local state. Property rights over farmlands are a complicated matter in China. Since Mao's time, all farmlands belong to the village collective, which is formed by all village men administered by the village government. After Mao's death, in the 1980s, farmlands' use rights were parceled and assigned to individual families. These property structures facilitate the local government's appropriation of the land assigned to each family. Countering this strategy, Baitu's families solidified their right to use the farmlands that were assigned to them in the 1980s. Making visible the farmlands' perimeter, fences clarified that government officials were not authorized to take possession of them.

4.2.2. Owning space in Los Angeles (advancing community-led designs)

The collective actions of Crenshaw's residents, leaders, and other stakeholders began with vocal resistance to the Metro's plan to run the train at-grade which would disrupt the historically Black businesses district. Resisters made themselves visible by using public spaces, City Hall, and social media to protest. When protest went unacknowledged by city and transportation authorities, stakeholders began to organize a response to Metro's oppressive design. While collective actions manifested in many non-spatial forms such as legal resistance and policy actions, stakeholders also took ownership of the spaces surrounding the at-grade rail line in order to make space for Blackness. A community-led design process provided opportunities for the residents to develop their own vision for the future – including urban designs imprinted with themes from the African diaspora, Black art, and Black owned storefronts – to demonstrate Black ownership of the corridor. In activating resources, communicating design stories, and enlisting a professional design team that also represented and involved community members, stakeholders formalized their own spatial vision instead of passively receiving Metro's vision for them.

4.2.3. Owning space in Rome (constructing intimacy in public)

Vendors constructed spaces of belonging that remained unknown to other city users. The porosity of Rome's urban fabric provided opportunities not only to hide during police raids, but also to conduct other essential, intimate activities that vendors could hardly carry out in the overcrowded apartments where they lived (e.g. using restrooms, showering). At times, vendors appropriated spaces by counting on the solidarity of others. Some street artists allowed vendors to hide merchandise under their equipment. Tourist guides let them walk along groups of clients during police raids. And shop assistants prevented police from entering some chain stores where sellers hid. Vendors equally created spaces of belonging in plain sight, e.g., as they sat down on monuments to eat, or when they

video chatted with relatives in Bangladesh. Positioning themselves in front of iconic landmarks as they talked to their mothers and wives, some vendors liked to think of those landmarks as symbols of their success back home.

4.3. *Breaking dominant aesthetics*

The symbolic meanings conveyed by built environments normalize aesthetic canons, or the sets of rules that establish what – and whom – will be perceived as “appropriate” in a given space (Cosgrove 1998). And indeed, crafting landscapes has long served authorities as a tool to remove people who look “out of place” (Cresswell 1996). Social constructions of race are essential to disciplining spaces along aesthetic canons. They normalize white spatial imaginaries that make “other” bodies stand out as intruders (Lipsitz 2011). But if the aesthetics of a space can exclude people, becoming visible where one “should not be” can also serve as a weapon of insurgency, as a way to confront the oppressors’ gaze by looking back and being seen (Ramaswamy 2014). This kind of visual insurgency can take multiple forms in space. As we show below, while residents in Baitu and Los Angeles purposely transformed spaces by making visible their own tastes and preferences, Rome’s vendors disrupt dominant canons by simply appearing in iconic sites.

4.3.1. *Breaking dominant aesthetics in Baitu (cultivating the “right” produce)*

Baitu villagers remained resistant to the produce that the state decided to cultivate on the lands that they used to own. They especially contested the choice of farming *bayuegua*, a fruit i.e. originally wild and that, when cultivated, farmers described as “fake” and alien to local identity. Advancing their own knowledge of the land, villagers also pointed out that the concrete-made posts that were placed by the local government to support fruit trees would pollute the soil, ultimately reducing its fertility. They complained to local officials, claiming that the land would be mostly suitable for growing rice or corn. These claims occasionally turned into physical re-appropriations of space. As the new farm did not occupy all the available plots (with the government’s intention to leave room for future expansions), villagers started farming unused land illegally. They grew other greeneries such as corn and scallions, which they considered more appropriate. By framing the *bayuegua* fruit as “out-of-place,” farmers constructed an aesthetic discourse that delegitimized the new social norms of the village landscape, challenging the legitimacy of state-led agribusiness. Furthermore, reappropriations of lost lands infringed the visual unity of the new farm, further delegitimizing the agricultural model imposed by the government.

4.3.2 *Breaking Dominant Aesthetics in Los Angeles (crafting Crenshaw as a Black Space)*

Destination Crenshaw used public art to honor Black culture along the corridor. Through months of design charrettes, organizing meetings, and storytelling, stakeholders sought to signal their belonging by weaving Black histories and futures into the streetscape and spaces along Crenshaw Boulevard. Although subtle, the streetscape aims to tell the story of survival and resilience. The design encompasses four nodes that present resourcefulness, honor Black firsts, tells of the efforts to resist established boundaries, and celebrates unity. The art cements a place in Los Angeles that celebrates Blackness. One example is the Sankofa inspired open-air museum that honors African heritage and communicates

the mythical bird's meaning: bringing the past forward to use what is useful. By telling their story through design elements and streetscape, community stakeholders tell the world "we were here" and "this is still our place." Although power structures forced stakeholders to work inside the oppressive dynamics, stakeholders created a way of Black place-making by inserting resistance through design negotiations.

4.3.3 Breaking Dominant Aesthetics in Rome (marking space with bodies and practices)

Vendors disrupted normalized aesthetics of how "authentic Romans" look like by seeing and being seen in the city center. By reciting Muslim prayers in public, for instance, traders broke racialized constructions of Rome as a white, Catholic space. Vendors interrupted crafted landscapes of whiteness through seemingly banal gestures such as socializing with colleagues, pausing to smoke, or eating. A vendor, for example, liked to go eat in front of a church where a guard would not let him sell. By staying on the very spot which was off-limits during working hours, the vendor said he wanted to assert his right to occupy that space just as any other tourist could. The vendors' visibility enabled practices of conviviality that shuffled social hierarchies. Some employees of high-end chain stores regularly bought coffee for vendors selling nearby their shop. And, if some patrollers made no secret of targeting vendors of color because they saw them as "inappropriate," others established familiar relationships with vendors, pausing to chat at the beginning and end of working hours. Vendors often took these informal chats as an opportunity to gather information about police plans, or to voice complaints about unfair treatments received by other patrollers.

5. Three pathways towards Urban Design Justice

While the processes that we have described above occur in very different contexts, people in each context design spaces through similar logics. We argue that architects and planners can learn from these logics to help advance design justice. As we explained above, we align with critical interpretations of expertise that refuse to see professionals as those who know better than others (Costanza-Chock 2020). And we are also fully aware that professionals in architecture and planning are only one kind of designer, as design itself is a process shaped by multiple human and non-human knowledges and agencies (Escobar 2017; Bennett 2010; Yaneva, 2022).

We believe however that such an interpretation cannot translate into an ever-relative approach. That is, while professional designers are only one type of many actors who intervene in the production of space, architects and planners should not exculpate themselves from actively seeking to address inequities. They rather need to get involved and take sides. We build on the work of scholars who have argued for a normative framework of urban design, one that systematically privileges the interests of the most marginalized (Goh, Loukaitou-Sideris, and Mukhija 2022; Loukaitou-Sideris 2020; Low and Iveson 2016). And while we embrace the principles of *Tactical Urban-isms*, which aim to center the voices of underserved communities through open-ended, temporary, and small-scale actions (Hou 2020), we also align with those who have recuperated design ambitions, proposing more radical, long-term transformations of space (blackreconstructioncollective.org).

Learning from the insurgent designs described above, we propose three pathways that architects and planners can undertake to help reverse oppression. We believe that the “pathway” metaphor expresses the tension between generalization and specificity that we imagine a professional praxis of Design Justice should adopt. As much as a walk on a pathway in the wilderness might require us to go off-trail to avoid a fallen tree, find temporary shelter to escape a sudden storm, or modify one’s intended trail to reach our final destination, the design pathways we propose are directions that contemplate infinite deviations from the scripted protocols, in order to adapt to specific contexts and achieve their just goals. In our three cases, e.g., assisting ground-up claims requires architects and planners to navigate diverse sets of challenges, dealing with diverging relations to the state, property regimes, and social constructions of racial and ethnic identity. There is no abstract formula to overcome these challenges. It is only through this sequence of in-depth observation of existing just designs, extraction of generalized directions, and readaptation onto hyper-contextualized interventions that we foresee a just design praxis being operationalized.

Based on our analysis in this paper, we suggest that there are at least three kinds of spatial operations that professional designers can put forward. We imagine these pathways to either be adopted independently, or be combined together, or even be expanded through further directions that we have not found in our own investigation. They certainly constitute an initial and partial contribution to the complicated effort to establish a normative framework of *Urban Design Justice*. As we illustrate below, we propose that architects and planners use their technical knowledge to *situate possibilities, exclude to include, and reject aesthetic canons*.

5.1. *Situate possibilities*

Our cases demonstrate that people deploy their situated knowledge to create spatial possibilities for profit and resistance. At times they manage to overcome structural barriers by acting within dominant planning systems. In Crenshaw e.g., residents protected legacy business by curating street design. At other times, people carve out spatial opportunities independently from architects and planners. This is the case in Rome, where vendors repurpose built forms to eke out a living. Still other times, people act in opposition to professional designers, like when Baitu’s villagers relocated farms uphill after losing their land.

Learning from the expertise of non-trained designers, architects and planners should seek to situate new possibilities for the self-empowerment of underprivileged groups. On the one hand, expanding on critical engagement practices (Sletto 2013; Roberts and Kelly 2019), designers should center projects on both the voices and control of oppressed people. These efforts must avoid superficial participations, which notoriously amplify the very injustices they claim to challenge (Miraftab 2004; Mattern 2020). In contexts where public engagement is relatively frequent, policies could make partnerships between residents and professionals compulsory. Something along these lines happened in Los Angeles, although only after residents mobilized to make it happen. As community advocates protested against the Metro project, planners worked with them to transform Crenshaw into a more accessible space of belonging and economic self-empowerment.

But we also suggest that, beyond supporting existing advocacies, architects and planners could assist marginalized people in creating possibilities that they may have not yet imagined. That is, designers should make a political use of their technical knowledge and trained creativity. This becomes especially relevant in contexts where oppressed groups may lack time or economic means to voice their needs, or in non-democratic systems where advocacies are not permitted. In Rome, where vendors have not yet organized resistance because they are too busy trying to survive, designers could use their privileged position to make spaces more welcoming for them. For example, they could provide vendors with spaces to meet and organize. Such spaces could easily be found among the many vacant public properties that exist in the center of Rome, which are known to local scholars and professionals but vendors hardly know about. In Baitu, rather than designing infrastructures for large-scale agribusiness, designers should craft tools to consolidate household production. Architects and planners could propose new farming techniques provided that they help optimize small family farms.

We want to stress that situating possibilities also requires designers to reflect on physical location and its political-economic roles. Oppressive urban designs tend to designate prime locations to the use of powerful actors, pushing other people to the margins, similarly to what happened in Baitu or Rome. A just urban design praxis should instead formally designate prime locations for use and economic benefit of underprivileged groups already inhabiting the site.

5.2. Exclude to include

Whether in Baitu, Los Angeles, or Rome, people counter dispossession by taking ownership of space: by activating places of belonging that unsettle uneven property regimes. These actions emerge out of different intentions. In cases like Baitu, where villagers put fences around their farms, spaces of belonging reflect a desire to assert families' possessions over collective lands. In Los Angeles, residents' challenges to formal designs serve to collectively organize against systemic patterns of racial dispossession. In contrast, a willingness to confront authorities is hardly present in Rome, where vendors activate spaces of belonging to satisfy basic needs. No matter the intentionality behind these spaces, each has the effect of forging new relations of belonging that assert alternative rights to the city.

Partnering with deprived groups, professional designers should facilitate appropriations that dismantle unjust property regimes. This may require architects and planners to operate on an *exclude-to-include* basis: centering the spatial needs of those who are usually excluded at the cost of unwelcoming others. It is by now accepted that no space is ever equally open to everyone (Fraser 1990). Making spaces accessible to as many users as possible may create the prerequisites for diverse people to mingle, possibly learning mutual respect (Anderson 2011). But we also know that encounters among different people at times accentuate, rather than ease, frictions (Matejskova and Leitner 2011). Critical scholars have indeed long argued against idealizing social mingling in public space, which may well aggravate the marginalization of oppressed groups (Amin 2008).

Mindful of this warning, architects and planners should systematically seek to advance the spatial rights of oppressed groups, even if this implies excluding others. In Los Angeles, e.g., planners could partner with community stakeholders to co-design spaces for people of color, with services and features that explicitly reflect and celebrate non-dominant cultures. In places like Baitu, experts could design land plots in ways that prevent large corporate farming to operate. Capillary irrigation systems and physical divisions between small land plots, e.g., would ostracize agribusiness production, which requires large-size fields. In Rome, providing basic infrastructures such as toilets and electric charging stations could ease the routines of vendors and legitimize their presence in public. While these infrastructures would especially target the vendors' needs, they would at the same time make the center less hostile to other users.

5.3. *Reject aesthetic canons*

The people across our three cases break dominant aesthetics by making their bodies and practices visible where they "should not be." In diverse political, economic, and environmental settings, this praxis acquires different forms. At times aesthetic ruptures stand as a conscious act of resistance, such as when Crenshaw residents designed streetscapes in order to honor Black culture, or when Baitu farmers informally planted more "authentic" produce than those imposed by the state. At other times, marginalized subjects interrupt aesthetic norms simply by being visible in space, like when street vendors eat, chat, and recite Muslim prayers in Rome's iconic sites.

Architects and planners are too often complicit in naturalizing exclusionary aesthetics. They should instead reject canons and co-design with underrepresented groups spaces that acknowledge and celebrate their difference. Translated into design praxis, this goal can take multiple directions. In cases such as Crenshaw and Baitu, where people affirm their history and legitimacy in space by intentionally placing symbols of Otherness, designers should provide technical knowledge to ensure that such symbols concretize in sound and safe built forms. In cases like Rome, where vendors disrupt crafted landscapes by simply satisfying needs, designers should provide infrastructures for such needs, even if they contrast hegemonic constructions of "the beautiful" and "the appropriate."

By suggesting that designers should reject canonical aesthetics we do not propose for them to apply a one-size-fits-all formula to make oppressed groups visible in space (Piazzoni 2020). There might be cases, e.g., where individuals want to remain unseen (Sandoval 2013). We equally refuse a "diversity-washing" approach where built forms are shaped to evoke the culture of deprived groups while in fact masking their systematic oppression (Koh and Freitas 2018). What we suggest is that designers should both be vigilant against their work reifying aesthetic canons of domination, and assist marginalized groups in breaking such canons through whatever built form, sign, or practice they want.

6. Conclusions

This paper has explored what kinds of design operations can inform a praxis of *Urban Design Justice*. While we interpret design as an always-political process that involves multiple actors, our attention has focused on setting directions for

professionals who practice in the fields of architecture and planning. Theorists of urban justice avoid prescribing design guidelines, all too aware of the disastrous social, environmental, and economic effects that spatial determinism has produced across the world. Yet such resistance may reinforce, rather than dismantle, patterns of oppression, further detaching theories of urban design from the ways in which architects and planners work in practice. Moving beyond critiques of design as a ubiquitous dispositive of oppression, multiple frameworks such as Tactical Urbanism, DIY, and Guerrilla Urbanism set important principles for centering the spatial needs of deprived groups. These Tactical Urbanisms, however, tend to focus on ephemeral, “small-scale” interventions, renouncing more comprehensive and ambitious visions of how more equitable urban forms should look like.

We have suggested that a normative, theoretical framework of *Urban Design Justice* needs to catalyze the many heterogeneous, open-ended, and situated pathways that *already* inform its praxis on the ground. Such pathways emerge out of the insurgent designs that people enact as they counter exclusion across the world. We have compared how people use and produce spaces to counter oppression in Baitu, Los Angeles, and Rome. These cases span across different, if not opposite social, political, and economic systems. The groups with whom each of us engaged experience exclusion in different ways, albeit all are systematically marginalized by on-going othering logics. And our own positionalities as researchers also varied greatly in each of our cases. We propose comparing in difference as a method that, by revealing how power structures operate through similar logics across radically different geographies, can help set a transformative praxis of design justice.

Despite the striking differences across our cases, we found that people in Baitu, Los Angeles, and Rome activate three kinds of insurgent designs in the face of power. First, they mobilize situated knowledges to carve out possibilities for profit and political resistance. As a way to counter state-led land dispossession, Baitu’s villagers relocated their farms and started cultivating abandoned lands. Mobilization by residents in Crenshaw led to a street design that helped businesses to thrive against the threat of erasure. And Rome’s immigrants sought to make ends meet by repurposing public spaces to sell merchandise. Second, people challenge dispossession by taking ownership of space: by emplacing spaces of belonging that disrupt dominant property regimes. The villagers of Baitu fenced their farms to assert possession over public lands. The residents of Crenshaw occupied spaces to resist the Metro project. And the vendors of Rome constructed intimate spaces in public to satisfy their needs. Finally, oppressed groups break dominant aesthetics by making their presence visible. In Baitu, farmers cultivated what they knew to be more “authentic” crops than those imposed by the state. In Los Angeles, residents designed streetscapes to honor Crenshaw as a place of Black belonging. In Rome, vendors disrupted racialized regimes of “appropriateness” by eating, chatting, and reciting Muslim prayers in iconic Catholic sites.

These insurgent designs, we argue, point to three pathways for the praxis of *Urban Design Justice*. First, architects and planners should *Situate Possibilities*. This requires not only, as others suggest, to support the advocacies of oppressed people, always prioritizing Indigenous design practices before proposing exogenous ones. But, by making a political use of their privileges and trained skills, designers should also propose spatial possibilities

that oppressed groups may have not yet imagined. Second, designers could apply an *Exclude-to-Include* principle. This requires unapologetically prioritizing the access and usage of marginalized groups, e.g., by co-designing spaces that honor their belonging, and satisfy the needs of oppressed people at the cost of excluding more privileged city dwellers. Finally, designers can *Reject Aesthetic Canons*. This requires that architects and planners refuse to comply with dominant constructions of what – and who – looks “beautiful” or “appropriate,” and instead support marginalized groups to be seen, or not to be seen in space. By no means these pathways constitute universal formulas or comprehensive solutions. The generalizations we draw from our comparison can serve as roadmaps for designers, but they should always be re-situated in the particular contexts in which their praxis operate.

By suggesting that professional designers situate possibilities, exclude to include, and reject aesthetic canons, we hope to help translate critical thinking into action, reversing spatial patterns of oppression. These design pathways are most certainly partial. We nonetheless believe that they can contribute to delineate a normative praxis of Urban Design Justice, highlighting concrete routes to systematically detach technical knowledge from the interests of oppressive social forces. We hope that further investigations will bring to light more practices of insurgent design already in place, and illuminate how these can inform more just design directions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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