

**CUBES**  
CENTRE FOR URBANISM  
& BUILT ENVIRONMENT STUDIES

**SCHOOL  
OF ARCHITECTURE  
& PLANNING**



## **Opening – People Building Better Cities exhibition**

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Acting Director: CUBES, Wits University**

**18 May 2013, Maboneng**

Good evening

My name is Claire Benit-Gbaffou, and in the name of Wits University, the School of Architecture and Planning, and CUBES, the Center for Urbanism and the Built Environment Studies, I welcome you all.

It is a real pleasure to welcome this travelling exhibition to Johannesburg. People Building Better Cities derives from an international educational programme, GLOBAL STUDIOS- initiated in 2005 by Dr Anna Rubbo. In Johannesburg Global studio has focused mainly on Diespoot, under the drive of Jennifer van der Bush, and a number of Diespoot activists and artists that I am very happy to see here today.

This exhibition opens a series of exciting events, taking place between Maboneng, Wits University and Diepsloot – but I am sure Anna and Jen will present this more in detail.

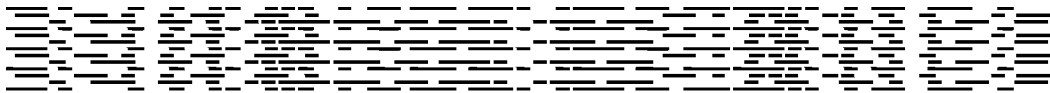
Why this is exciting to me, as CUBES director and having coordinated for 2 years a Studio that we called Yeoville Studio, is to start engaging on the questions, the challenges and the possibilities that city studios open.

By City studios, broadly speaking, I mean forms of engagement between academia and local communities, especially – but possibly not exclusively- in marginal or disadvantaged areas. They are driven by a number of different objectives, that at times are complementary, but at times can become contradictory or at least create tensions – imperatives of education and research (academic institutions) and imperative of usefulness / benefit to the community.

As educators and researchers, of course, we believe city Studios are ways of improving the training of future built environment professionals – building not only *for* but *with* people, building from the ground rather than from the office, understanding the complex impacts that policy, planning, design or architectural decisions might have on people's lives.

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Community needs are generally more immediately short term- rather, their short terms needs are so glaring that this long term education of professionals cannot be their primary focus or expectations.

The ambition of city studios is generally to make a positive impact on communities – what ever this impact may be. However, some academics involved in studios are starting to unpack that this ambition, even if genuine, might sometimes fail – and that we first have to be careful not to harm communities (for instance by raising unrealistic expectations, or intervening in community political dynamics in ways that create imbalances, instabilities, violence). Many of us start debating more carefully about what types of benefits can be expected, and how some of them could be built in city studio project. I believe there are and they can be hugely positive benefits for communities – and this exhibition, as well as the forthcoming weeks’ events in partnership with Diesploot’s activists, might alert us to some of them.

My second point is – and it is what this exhibition starts showcasing as well- that it is interesting to reflect on the variety of city studios, the different forms they take. I see three types of city studios for the moment.

- A once-off, short and intense, engagement with one specific community, with a quite high level team (typically post graduate students), with often the consolidation of a specific building or project (Global Studio).
- A long term, multi years, individual academic engagement and link with one specific site (on which the academic brings different generations of students, also generally of a post graduate level) – Marie Huchzermeyer’s engagement with harry gwala informal settlement, Hannah Le Roux with different parts of the city.
- A medium term (2 years) engagement, with a partnership with specific CSOs, and the involvement of multiple students at various stages of their studies and from various disciplines (Yeoville Studio).

Of course these are types, and many studios are in fact mixed... (time wise, level and discipline, project, forms of partnerships). EX - global studio in diesploot opened to a long term engagement through Jennifer’s sticky solutions

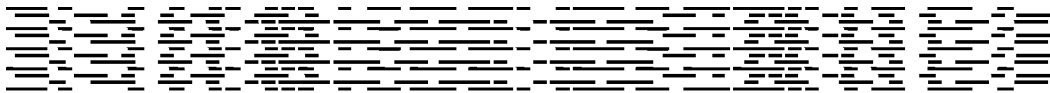
Each of this form I would say brings a different answer to the question I raised earlier – on th articulation between educational and research purposes on the one hand, the nature of community engagement and benefits on the other.

I think they all have great value, but emphasize different elements. It is a discussion I often have with my architect- friends - myself being more of a planner/ political geographer – we tease one another a lot on these issues): the short and intense

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engagement allows for a freshness of ideas, a way of thinking outside the box, a creative surge that a longer term entanglement with community politics might kill – the paralysis of knowing too much, of thinking too much from what exists and being trapped in it. But of course shorter term engagements might sometimes lead to white elephants, or to blunders, sometimes dramatic. The longer term engagements might allow for other types of changes or benefits and political understanding on how to drive change in policy or more structural living conditions.

Both creative surge and in depth social and political understanding of community dynamics are of value when academia engage with communities- we need both. I hope this exhibition contributes to make us engage further about how best to balance these.

Notwithstanding these challenges – that I argue it is our responsibility, as academics and community leaders, to unpack, based on our now diverse and consolidated experience of partnerships- I believe city studios are extremely important parts of our practices. As forms of engagement with the broader society and de-ghettoisation of perspectives (both at university and community levels), beyond social, political and urban boundaries. As unleashing new resources, skills, capacities, networks. As opening space for new visions, imaginations and perspectives for our fragmented cities. Thank you for your attention.

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