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THIS WEEK'S ISSUE features research from the Tehran Urban Innovation Center (TUIC), which in 2018 initiated a series of small-scale seasonal studios in Iran's capital. Below, TUIC members Tarlan Khoylou, Mahdi Najafi, and Nashid Nabian reflect on the findings of these studios and their potential for urban intervention.—EDS.

OPPORTUNISTIC URBANISM

Tarlan Khoylou, Mahdi Najafi
& Nashid Nabian

WE KNOW THAT for the last number of decades developing countries have been undergoing urban transformation at a faster pace than developed countries, throwing up immense challenges in terms of policy development and urban design.

Paradigmatic of these challenges is the Mehr Housing project, arguably Iran's most controversial public housing program to date, which broke ground in 2006, in the wake of a severe rise in housing prices. The project has been criticised for its lack of infrastructure and public services, isolation from existing urban fabric (a function of low local land value), and a poor overall quality in design. The imposition of its plan by government bureaucrats was one of the key reasons that some commentators and urban critics recognise this project—along with a host of similar projects—as a failure in meeting the needs of both residents and the city, in social, cultural, and economic terms.

In stark contrast to the top-down, broad-strokes approach of the Mehr Housing project stands the Maak je Stad! (Make Your City!) project in Amsterdam, a series of social innovation competitions where citizens and community-based groups working on urban challenges were invited to apply for funding as well as a spot in what was essentially a social innovation accelerator program, administered and adjudicated by a consortium of civic institutions.

Made possible when, in 2016, Amsterdam was awarded €1,000,000 by the EU as part



Workers planting trees on Valiasr Street, Tehran—still considered the longest street in the Middle East—leading to the Royal Tehran Hilton Hotel (now Parsian Esteghlal International Hotel), then the tallest building in Iran. (Image: Life Magazine).

of its designation as Innovation Capital of Europe, Maak je Stad! was the outcome of the city's adaptation of the 'triple helix' (coined by Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff)—in which government, the private sector, and academia work together to tackle urban challenges—and to which the city added the fourth element of direct citizen participation; making the 'quadruple helix' model.

Maak je Stad! kicked its accelerator program into gear by selecting 37 groups out of 475 applicants, each being awarded between €5,000 to €20,000 to help expand their capacities and operations. The initiatives are wide-ranging: from helping young people get into the construction trades through the renovation of run-down buildings to providing environmental and agricultural education to women from vulnerable backgrounds.

Although barely three years old, Maak je Stad! has so far proved a powerful example of a contemporary framework of urban development that we in the TUIC would

consider 'Urban Acupuncture' or 'Grassroots Urbanism': frameworks for actions that are micro-targeted, low-cost, democratic, empowering, and small-scale, and which municipalities cannot easily provide on their own. Urban Acupuncture works in contrast to large-scale development or redevelopment projects that involve thousands of acres and millions of dollars of opaque financing. In a similar vein, Grassroots Urbanism is a framework which enshrines and fosters the right of all stakeholders to equal opportunity in the participation, formulation and implementation of urban policy.

In the case of Tehran the city has been mostly subjected to governmental top-down decisions in its urban development programs, which are sometimes highly contingent on the political and economic gain of the decision-makers and implementers in the public sector. It is at this level that grassroots institutions and initiatives can play a key role in ensuring the interests of everyday citizens are realised and kept at the forefront of urban decisions.

At the TUIC we have developed a practical framework for urban intervention called Opportunistic Urbanism (OU), which has been worked through over the course of seasonal design-by-research/research-by-design studios in Tehran. Through these studios we have sought to identify urban challenges—such as poor waste management—to reconsider and reframe them as unexplored potential, and to eventually build transformative projects through which these challenges are met. While these projects were imagined operating at a smaller scale, we have made sure to always frame them within larger, more complex systems. We have also developed pilot projects with as broad a range of applicability as possible, to maximise the potential of possible points of intervention.

OU is defined as a hierarchical structure, which starts at the top with an agenda-defined framework, and flows down to more precise levels of operations:

- **Agenda** (*Always Opportunistic Urbanism*)
- **Fields of Inquiry** (*For example, urban waste or agriculture*)
- **Context of Implementation** (*Always Tehran*)
- **Reference Literature** (*Texts on 'Circular Economy Theory'*)
- **Strategies to Approach Market** (*For example CSR, CSV, Non-profit Collaboration*)
- **Technique** (*Always TUIC's 'Design-By-Research / Research-By-Design methodology'*)
- **Operation** (*Always the Seasonal Studios at TUIC*)
- **Deliverable** (*For example, a minimum working prototype, an urban demo to test the MWP, or TUIC 101 publications*)

These studios began in the summer of 2018, with the first field of inquiry being urban waste. The TUIC collaborated with Sam Cafe, a popular cafe chain in Tehran, and together agreed on developing a two-part waste reduction program that aligned with their recently-started CSR program. The studio explored not only how we could achieve zero waste production with Sam Cafe, but also how we could integrate and recycle any excess waste back into patterns of urban production and consumption.

We began first by redesigning the cafe's menu, providing customers with information on each item's associated water and energy usage. We called it an Informative Menu; one that encouraged customers to link their choices with the longer and often unseen lines of production



and waste management in a bid to reduce water and energy waste.

The second part of the project developed from the discovery that most of the waste produced in the cafe consisted of Tetra Pak cartons of milk. Since there was already a plan in place to design portable packaging for take-away cups, we decided to upcycle the leftover milk cartons as material for the packaging. In the trial phase of the project, 700 Tetra Paks were transformed into take-away packages—designed and developed by the TUIC—and produced by people in a drug rehab facility supported by Toloo Bineshanha Society.

In the autumn of 2018 the TUIC began another seasonal studio, focused on food consumption and sustainability in the urban context. The studio's key concern was how to raise awareness and promote sustainable diets, given food production and distribution systems contribute to at least 25% of human-made greenhouse gas emissions and are responsible for 70% of water consumption. To this end the TUIC, in collaboration with the Iranian National Museum of Science and Technology (INMOST), developed a series of board games and field games that made use of and gamified the most recent nutrition literature by the USDA. These games were then presented to the public in a festival hosted by INMOST, and are currently in development to be published and distributed nationwide.

The output of the TUIC studios is an alternative approach to urban development, and ultimately part of a much longer-term process whose goal is to eventually engage all four main levels of urban actors with the urban development process: citizens, entrepreneurs, associations that regulate operational paradigms of entrepreneurship in a given industry, and governmental agencies that regulate said industries. But the TUIC,

in the context of Tehran specifically, is but one body seizing the opportunities there for other urban think-tanks, incubators and innovation centres; opportunities to expand their vocabulary of collaboration, to play a defining role as a facilitator and mediator of grassroots problem solving.

If we can do so, along with our colleagues, we will share common ground with the likes of projects such as Maak je Stad!, as well as many other projects across the world, challenging the established paradigms that are ultimately working to degrade our built environment.

Tarlan Khoylou is an urban design alumnus of the City University of New York. She has previously collaborated with the Terreform UR centre for advanced urban research in NYC and now is senior researcher and designer at the TUIC. Her main research interest is the social and environmental aspects of urban phenomena.

Mabdi Najafi is head of research at the TUIC, and a researcher and designer, with a focus on innovative science outreach models. He is an Architecture and Interaction Design graduate of the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia (IAAC).

Nashid Nabian is the co-founding director of [Shift] Process Practice, a Tehran-based Architecture studio, and the TUIC, the research and development proxy of [Shift] Process Practice.

Above: Collage, imagining the co-existence of top-down and bottom-up urban development. (Image: TUIC, 2018).

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