

# ORIGIN CASA NSA

CASA stands for Coimbra Architecture Summer Atelier, but also carries a powerful message and meaning behind the four simple letters. In Portuguese, “casa” means house or, in a more colloquial and familiar manner, home. The double meaning brings a playful and light-hearted element to this unique event.

**COIMBRA  
ARCHITECTURE  
SUMMER ATELIER**

# CA 2019 SA

## ORIGIN

VOID

BOUNDARY

EPHEMERAL

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## Inhabited Voids

### Visual Ethnography as a Tool for Critical Urban Transformation

Nelson Mota

In architectural discourse, the concept of the void stands for what is not built, the other half of the most fundamental architectural endeavor: shaping the *built* environment. The void comprises what remains between buildings, or inside them; it is simultaneously the starting-point and the endpoint of an architectural journey. Many architectural critics have explored the complexities of the void. Colin Rowe famously used figure-ground maps (also known as solid/void plans) as a powerful tool for comparative analysis. Ignasi Sola-Morales's concept of *terrain vague* was a sophisticated theoretical concept used to denounce the commodification of abandoned post-industrial areas, obsolete and unproductive spaces and buildings. But architects' fascination with Giambattista Nolli's "New Plan of Rome" also shows the discipline's interest in voids as an indication of the blurred delimitations between the private and the public realm.

Most of the discussions around the void tend to explore its metaphysical meaning and value. However, they seldom address the "nitty gritty" details of the everyday life that happens in the interstices of buildings, and in the spaces in-between. In other words, they generally fall short in describing the void as an active locus of human inhabitation. In my capacity as an educator of architectural design, I have been trying to counter this tendency, introducing human-centred research methodologies in the design process that allow students to understand how voids (of different types, scales and characteristics) are lived-in spaces. In the global housing educational programme at TU Delft, we have been using architectural drawings combined with techniques borrowed from visual ethnography to stimulate an in-depth study of voids-as-places.

Mapping voids has thus become a key component of our design studios, which have been focused on the development of affordable housing projects for low and middle-income countries such as Ethiopia, India, Bangladesh and Ghana. During the projective research phase of the design studios, the students are challenged to create a book of patterns that brings together a critical assessment of five aspects that characterize everyday life: Income Generation, Social Spaces, Materials and Craftsmanship, Borders and Boundaries, and Domestic Practices. Each of these aspects provides a key to reading the built environment as a sequence of inhabitable voids.

#### **INCOME GENERATION**

Since the industrial revolution, people have migrated to cities to look for opportunities to generate income. The possibilities for economic collaboration among residents materialize in the urban voids. Observing and mapping patterns of income generation opens a gateway to understanding how people make a living, and what the spatial conditions are in which these activities take place. These patterns go beyond established polarities. They depict urban conditions that accommodate formal and informal practices, temporary and permanent activities.

## **SOCIAL SPACES**

The spatial relations that characterize our routines are, to a great extent, determined by an urban order designed to stimulate forms of behavior meant to be repeatable and predictable. Predictability is a key component of the protocols of socialization, and influences the way the urban order is programmed and designed. In their diverse shapes and forms, urban voids such as squares, alleys, streets and courtyards have a certain potentiality to perform and can be designed to try and shape human behaviour. Social spaces, however, result from a constant negotiation between opposing forces: social control and emancipatory practices. Mapping patterns of social spaces is key to understanding not only urban conditions determined by structures of social control but also everyday practices that resist mechanisms of social normalization.

## **MATERIALS AND CRAFTSMANSHIP**

The material results of labour and practices are embedded in the buildings where people work or dwell, or in the surfaces people walk or stand on. They are key evidence of the energies of individuals who work collectively to build the infrastructure that supports everyday life. As such, the patterns of materials and craftsmanship that define the background for people's social life provide important clues about the technical and cultural achievements of a community. They reveal the processes of making from the most ordinary manifestations of the vernacular tradition to the most advanced contemporary building processes and techniques. Mapping the patterns of materials and craftsmanship shows how culture and technology are reshaping labour and craftsmanship and redefining urban livelihoods.

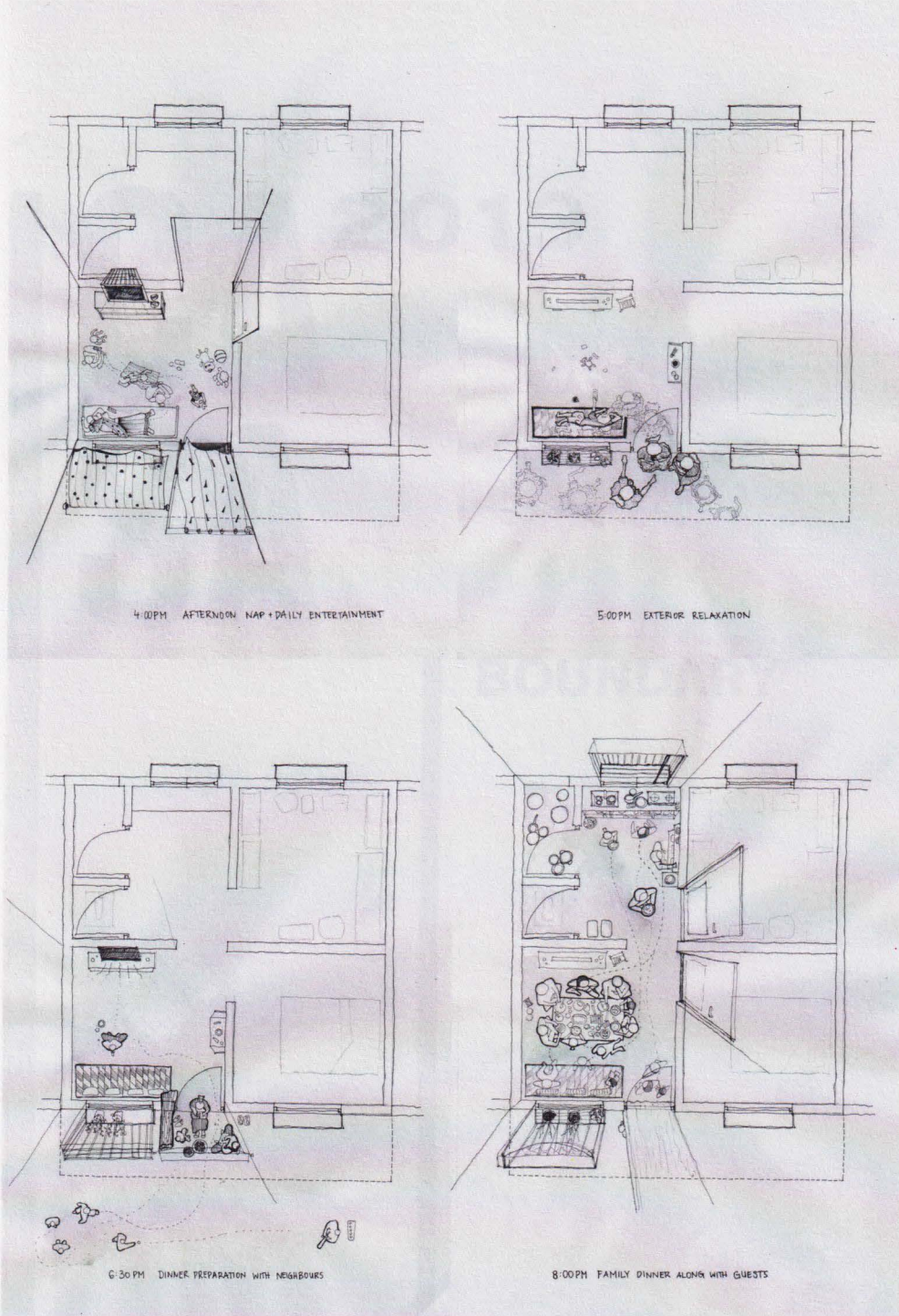
## **BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES**

Urban voids are the background where new intersections between people, their objects, the spaces where they dwell, and their social practices are constantly being negotiated. With different levels of flexibility and mobility, borders and boundaries are a constant presence in the everyday life of city residents. In-between spaces and thresholds constantly produce a universe of intersubjectivity that challenges social and spatial polarities such as private/public or solid/void. Observing and mapping the patterns of borders and boundaries reveals both well-defined and subtle edge conditions – tangible borders and boundaries but also intangible and tacit devices of control and detachment – that are constantly being negotiated.

## **DOMESTIC PRACTICES**

The domestic space is arguably one of the most charged places for human inhabitation. It is subject to a great number of tacit and explicit rules that determine the protocols of socialization, gender roles, education and production. It is a space for emancipatory practices and resistance as well as control and alienation. The domestic space is an extremely dynamic entity. It changes from hour to hour, from month to month, from generation to generation. Mapping patterns of domestic practices is thus a challenging yet essential endeavor. Temporality and agency are two essential factors that need to be explored to “decodify” the practices that make the domestic space an active void.

These five aspects explore urban voids as a concept that goes beyond its strict meaning. Rather than the absence of something, the notion of void should be re-conceptualized as the origin, the background for human inhabitation. Mapping the void – in all its different aspects – is thus a powerful exercise to understand the reality of the site where a project will be executed. It should be seen as the primordial stage in design decision-making which is essential for a successful reactivation of spaces into places.



Analysis of the activity zones in a typical apartment of a low-income family in Nalasopara (Mumbai) from 4:00PM to 8:00PM. Drawing by Claire Barry, Joseph Tjong-Ayong, Shirin Hadi, 2018.

CASA ORIGIN

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