Breaking from Plato's cave: Towards a holistic approach in urban housing in İstanbul

Fugindo da caverna de Platão: rumo a um enfoque holístico em habitação urbana em Istambul

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ABSTRACT – This paper aims to address the effects of speed as an urban fragment in the city and suggests finding ways to change perceptions toward the negative effects of speed in İstanbul. It is supposed that changing our perception or ways of approaching the built environment can raise awareness or reactions that are steps to criticizing urban transformation from different perspectives. Thus, it is proposed that Plato's cave allegory be taken as an example for the dwellers of Istanbul. This allegory can be represented in the urban realm through intertwined layers of construction. Against these layers of boundaries, Breaking from Plato's cave is suggested as a metaphor for constructing an alternative strategy to change our way of perception of rapid construction in urban space. For the demolishment of the boundaries between the ideal and real worlds, which speed has aggrandized, there can be an escape by playing with the displayed reality through developing a holistic approach and a non-schismogenic artistic intervention. A dweller today needs to act in order to escape the invisible frontiers through unfolding reality. In breaking from Plato's cave, there is a search for a way to break down this "reality" as it is perceived by many dwellers through play and active participation.

Key words: speed, breaking from Plato's cave, İstanbul, urban housing, metaphorical thinking, holistic approach.

RESUMO – Este artigo tem como objetivo abordar os efeitos da velocidade como um fragmento urbano da cidade e sugere encontrar maneiras de mudar as percepções em relação aos efeitos negativos da velocidade em Istambul. Supõe-se que mudar a nossa percepção ou formas de abordar o ambiente construído pode aumentar a consciência ou reações que são meios para criticar a transformação urbana a partir de diferentes perspectivas. Assim, propõe-se que alegoria da caverna de Platão seja considerada como um exemplo para os moradores de Istambul. Esta alegoria pode ser representada na esfera urbana através de camadas entrelaçadas de construção. Contra essas camadas de limites, fugir da caverna de Platão é sugerida como uma metáfora para a construção de uma estratégia alternativa de mudar a nossa forma de percepção da construção rápida no espaço urbano. Para a demolição das fronteiras entre os mundos ideais e reais, que a velocidade tem engrandecido, pode haver uma fuga, jogando com a realidade apresentada através do desenvolvimento de uma abordagem holística e uma intervenção artística não cismogênica. Hoje, um morador de Istambul precisa agir a fim de escapar das fronteiras invisíveis através de desdobramento realidade. Ao fugir da caverna de Platão, há uma busca por uma maneira de romper com esta "realidade" como ela é percebida por muitos moradores através de brincadeiras e participação ativa.

Palavras-chave: velocidade, fuga da caverna de Platão, Istambul, habitação urbana, o pensamento metafórico, abordagem holística.

Speed in the city

Speed has been a key term since the industrial revolution and has been related to the modern city since the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the beginning of the twentieth century, speed was manifested in serial production, transportation, and telecommunication systems and in the apocalyptic visions of utopists, as well as in Le Corbusier's expression of the relationship between machine and architectural production. Speed and the aesthetics of speed were seen as important factors for development and growth (Harvey, 1989).

Since the modernist period, speed has become the measure of industrial production and creativity in urban life. The dynamics of the urban life have become the focus of physical and conceptual production. Starting in the 1960s, the manner of living in cities has shifted from the consumption of products to the consumption of services. The consumption of services has continued to increase over time and has underlined an essential part of the mechanical and pragmatic thinking that reflects urban narratives. After the 1970s, capitalism experienced a sharp transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Fragmentation, telecommunication, transportation, banking services, and production systems have also caused a time-space compression of the world, reducing it to physical and communicative units. This new relation of space and time has changed urban narratives, demanding a new system of organization that

has greater flexibility and mobility. These changes have affected cultural life (Harvey, 1989). After the 1980s, urban patterns led to new information technologies.

According to Virilio and McLuhan, the big changes observed in cities push cities forward into a global competition and new spatial production fragments like liquidity within information technologies (Barley, 2000). Virilio mentions speed as something that "permits us to see, to hear, to perceive and thus to conceive more intensively the present world." Speed is related to the "impact of modern technologies on perception and on social, political and military development." For Virilio, speed is both the medium in which collective experience unfolds and a key motor or driving force that underpins the historical dynamic of that experience (James, 2007).

Speed triggers the experimental

Speed has been a driving force of capitalism over urban structures. Capitalism has been changing urban structures and, increasingly, the production of different structures in the urban space. The urban space has formed as a marketplace for new products relating to fragmentation and transitivity (Harvey, 2001). Socioeconomic developments, technological change, and rapid growth give rise to the formation of different urban models in the outskirts of the city (Lahti, 2004). Some of these urban models are untied to the city, such as the self-sufficient satellite-city model, or are complex and contradictory, such as the information-city model, where connectedness and the potential of creating linkages in the built environment become important.

These different urban models in the city not only reflect the economic situation of local governance in the place where they are planned, but they also display the transformative power of speed as a fragment in shaping the potential of the place in which they are applied. Whether they are successful or deficient in creating an environment, the different models of the city make up altogether different narratives, which may, however, display slightly similar patterns as a whole affected by speed. Thus, speed accelerates the creation of emerging patterns in urban models by creating invisible borders between urban activity and the dweller through different accelerations and realities, which overlap with each other.

At the same time, speed creates turning points with new concepts and metaphors in a city. It has the potential to change the inner dynamics of fragments, shaping the city and accelerating the meaning of transformative factors in the built environment. Along with the transformative factors or dynamic fragments, integration or articulation becomes the key issue in living in the city.

Articulation is the way of connectedness of a dweller in the city, a place in the world. Articulation can be a feeling, a meaning, or a planned strategy. The articulation of the dweller is much more than an adaptation to one's environment. Articulation is about a more integral connection of the distinct parts of a whole and the way these parts fit each other, like how a city fits with the dwellers.

When articulation is not intended by the authorities, speed becomes an instrument for homogenizing our perception of built environment through repetitive housing patterns. In metropolitan cities, although diverse acts are still latent, there are woven templates for ways of existing in the city. How are these templates perceived by the dweller, and how can one discern the idea behind this built reality? To what extent does change provide new context for the perceiver? Despite different urban models and localities in a city, globalization and capitalism transform ways of perception in a homogeneous way by establishing similar ways of existing in the city. This transformation may also convert the narrative of the city to image production, by underlining a programmed articulation form of bonding of the dweller with the environment. As David Harvey mentions, a city's consuming patterns of services become more important than its consuming patterns of goods (Harvey, 1989). And the pattern of service overlaps patterns of housing consumption as displayed in real estate advertisements.

Today, the representation of how a city operates in a global scale is more important than how it functions, and mass housing is the key factor in the operating process. This idea represents the situation in which the planning of the narrative of cities becomes an essential part of planning, and the pattern is strategically managed by the authorities.

However, one can criticize the narrative of built environment in which speed has created masses of blocks of houses on top of each other in terms of articulation. The notion of articulation of a dweller with his/her environment can be discussed through breaking from certain rules and methodologies which speed has led to. Although this possibility is a relative one, it might be experienced through an example in Istanbul (Figure 1).

Finding ways to transform the perception of speed in Istanbul

In İstanbul, not only the outskirts of the city, but also the central areas have been transforming as a result of rapid urban growth starting in the 1980s. The relationship of İstanbul with speed started from the Ottoman period in the 19th century. "İstanbul has experienced migration from different parts at gradually increasing speed. The background of these newcomers has been the most powerful factor in the reshaping of the city during the last three decades" (Turgut, 2001, p. 18). In the first half of the 1950s, with the mechanization of agricultural production and rapid economic growth, the city's population increased dramatically (Gül, 2009, p. 146). Since the

Figure 1. Urban housing in İstanbul.
Source: Pablo Martínez Muñiz, Fragmentpolis (2008-2010).

1950s, the urban dynamics of İstanbul changed in relation to increasing urban population.

Mostly newcomers settled in locations for the construction labor sector. There occurred a housing crisis and illegally implemented squatter houses, called *gecekondus*, initially in rural areas of the city. The design of these *gecekondus* displayed signs of rural-agricultural-traditional patterns. Over time, *gecekondus* slightly turned into multi-storey apartment blocks, as the city grew and population increased. These squatter settlements became part of rural life styles and with speed they changed and became denser.

As Turgut mentions, squatterisation became a transitional life style and changed urban formation patterns, socio-cultural, psychological, economic, political and physical attributes (Turgut, 2001, p. 19). According to her, "The speed of changes in physical environment which emerged because of economic and political factors is less than the speed of the changes in socio-cultural concepts in the continuum of space" (Turgut, 2001, p. 24).

Especially after the 1990s, there occurred an intensive transformation, where mass housing swept away all differences and segregated the city by gated communities and gentrification. These two factors have still been used as a key marketing strategy in housing and mass housing advertisements, which leads to segregation and homogenizing of urban life in İstanbul. Furthermore, the massive housing settlements implemented especially after this period burst out in nearly every district of the city, invading pre-existing urban space, and dramatically sweeping away public space.

Quoting Öncü, Keyder mentions this transformation as follows:

> Most of the physical transformation associated with globalization in Istanbul has taken place since the mid-1980s: gated communities, five-star hotels, the city packaged as a consump-

tion artifact for tourists, new office towers, expulsion of small business from the central districts, beginnings of gentrification of the old neighborhoods, and world images on billboards and shop windows (Keyder, 2005, p. 128).

The rapid growth led to an unplanned urbanization, a chaotic settlement city. After the 1990s, intensive transformation came to the urban agenda, homogenizing the city.

For a city which has not yet completed its industrial development such as İstanbul, this sudden migration to the city center and cultural shift began transforming the city pattern. As Öncü mentions, "İstanbul has always been a major consumer city, [...] a divided city, diverse in its cultural and social geography" (Öncü, 1997, p. 58) and the integration of the city into the global scene created myths of ideal living patterns that can be easily consumed by its dwellers (Öncü, 1997, p. 57).

Although the city had few city centers, it became more fragmented, where district and zones had relationally different speeds and inner dynamics. In satellite cities, it failed to create a living atmosphere or a genius loci, and ended up in closed areas (Figures 2, 3, 4). From the 1990s to 2000s and subsequently, this uncontrollable urban growth mostly observed as gentrification has been continuing without a grounded background.

The negative effects of speed seen through the eyes of dwellers can be observed mostly in contemporary mass housing areas. Today, the city is under invasion of gentrification and mass urban transformation, which results in more fragmented ways of life and segregation. Many dwellers expect housing to create articulation. However, the newly built projects fail to create a proper environment related to articulation. Indeterminism and complexity emerge as the new transformative factors in the narrative of the built environment. Being adaptable to fast-changing conditions of lifestyle, or at least having a potential to adapt, is important so that dwellers experience a sense of articulation with their changing environment. However, in İstanbul articulation means adaptation to consuming patterns, which are strategically determined and controlled by the authorities. With different local economic and political realities and urban models in one city, the city acts as a whole entity with different elements. The city is getting more homogenized and shaped by certain strategies that sweep away differences in social life.

In this context, departing from developing an idea of a flexible view toward differentiation in urban housing in emerging metaphors brings an approach at multiple levels that are not separate, but overlap each other. Developing a holistic approach to the application of housing policies and understanding the phenomena from different perceptions of dwellers can open up a space for breaking boundaries.

The thresholds for breaking boundaries lie in playing with approaches to housing. People's response to their quickly changing environment results in new

Figure 2. Unprogrammed dense urban pattern.
Source: Pablo Martínez Muñiz, Fragmentpolis (2008-2010).

Figure 3. Social exclusion of dwellers through housing.

Figure 4. "Speed" on urban housing, as it is understood by housing authorities.

experiments of perception. The internal mechanism of the system can be disrupted through a pragmatic and experimental approach. Today, the physical elements of the built environment in cities gain more importance through their close relationship with the dweller or through the meaning they construct. If this narrative is readable from the eyes of the dweller, the city becomes livable. However, in certain cases the narrative is intervened and re-formed by the dwellers. In order to achieve a clear reading of the urban narrative, Plato's cave allegory can be taken as an example for understanding the openings of an escape or breakthrough from existing and uncomforting realities and for triggering the experimental.

Breaking from Plato's cave[1]: Multiple realities as re-shaped by the dwellers

Plato's cave allegory is about a group of prisoners who are trapped in a cave and are forced to look at shadow images projected on the walls of the cave. One of the prisoners escapes from the cave in search of the reality behind the represented world and realizes that reality is built in front of him as a poor shadow lightened with a fire behind him. He plans to return back to inform the other prisoners in the cave. However, the shadows appear weaker and darkness becomes difficult to adapt to. The other prisoners laugh at him. Briefly, through this uncomfortable experience, he finds multiple realities behind the shadowy scene (Plato, 1968).

Plato's cave allegory can be related to the urban realm through the search for an escape between the intertwined layers of embedded housing blocks. Plato's point is similar to our perception of the physicality of the objects. For him, the prisoners can be mistaken, since they are content with the images they see (Plato, 1968).

The allegory can be analyzed as opening new ways of perception in Istanbul. Against the layers of boundaries, an experiment in understanding this escape can be suggested as an alternative strategy to change our way of perception. In the İstanbul case, speed is scrutinized in terms of contemporary housing approaches. In İstanbul, where "contemporary housing" has become an important point for weaving a global network of relations in the society, speed is increasingly being used as a strategic motto by the government and private construction firms. Authorities have been manipulating rapid construction as a key marketing strategy with respect to providing the latest technology and advancements for the masses. This manipulation has transformed the meaning of housing into a stable perception of a homogeneous and consumable lifestyle pattern for the past thirty years. The

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[1] Breaking From Plato's cave was a name of the competition held by SocioDesign Foundation in 2011. This experimental entry by the author was awarded honorable mention. See http://www.sociodesignfoundation.com/2011-vignette-competition-winn/.

results of this approach are observed as the typical mass production of repetitious housing blocks, which produce an anonymous space for the dweller in a negative sense (Figures 5, 6, 7).

Therefore, in existing planning strategies, metaphors can act as in-between fragments that are adapted to many situations. Metaphors become a transformable cover for applying consumption patterns in housing production and environmental policies, which are frequently changed. To demolish the boundaries of this "fake metaphorization," it is possible to escape by playing with the displayed reality that speed has aggrandized. A dweller today needs to act in order to get out of the invisible frontiers through unfolding reality. In "breaking from Plato's cave," there can be a search for a way to break down this "reality" as it is perceived by many dwellers.

Breaking is about seeing things as carrying potential for change. It is about unfolding "reality" for a new perception. For breaking, one needs to analyze and criticize rules about the built materiality of the environment and needs to play with these rules, thinking independently of the image of the built reality (Figure 8).

Figure 5. Unprogrammed settlements vs. the planned.
Source: Pablo Martínez Muñiz, Fragmentpolis (2008-2010).

Figure 7. A heap of mass housing blocks embedded in each other.

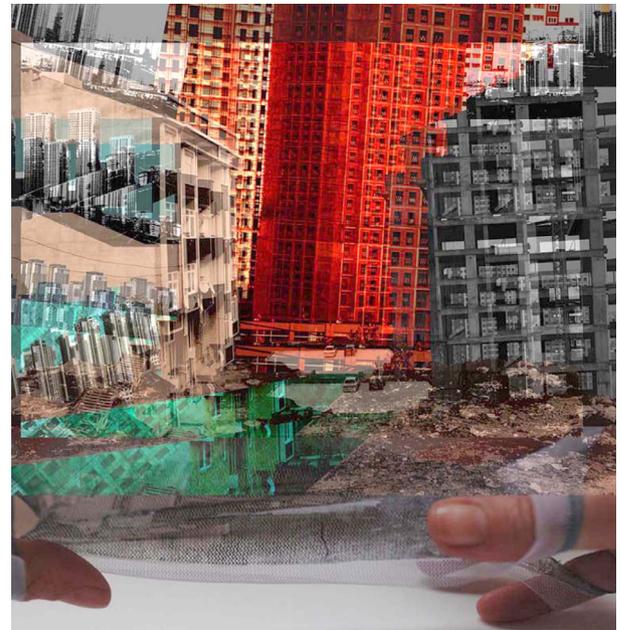**Figure 6.** Dense small neighborhoods.

Figure 8. Speed as an operative tool for changing the perception of mass housing blocks. The repetitious blocks reflect homogenization. To demolish the designed frontiers between the dweller and the designed city, a dweller can play with the visible fragments of the top-down planned order: Changing ways of perception and approaches.

How can one unfold methodologies and policies to transform urban life in the İstanbul case? We can develop a methodology through observing the urban dynamics of İstanbul. İstanbul is rhizomatic by its formation, has a self-organizing pattern, which is flexible. The city has several centers with different speeds in terms of production of information, culture, finance, real estate and it is socially and economically heterogeneous.

Hierarchical policies do not only cause blanks in the network, where the network can still create a new mesh in-between depending on these. To change the perception of built environment and city involvement such as critical participation, we have to see speed as a key fragment in urban dynamics in a global context and its reflections in İstanbul. However, on the other side of the coin, we also have to observe the dominant view by housing authorities that neglect its outcomes such as homogenizing a heterogeneous city. As Keyder mentions, "the new immigrants are socially excluded," in the sense that they have a weaker socio-economic integration and also often face the threat of political exclusion (Keyder, 2005, p. 132).

So, how can one break the boundaries of this interwoven pattern of urbanity in İstanbul? A metaphorical alternative to this question may be through developing an awareness that has several levels in relation to real everyday existence. The repetitions of layers of mass housing blocks in İstanbul create a surface for a new design, as well as a boundary and play area. As suggested by the anthropological observations of Gregory Bateson on schismogenesis[2] sequences in Balinese culture, if one can create a movement, which is a symmetrical attitude as a response toward the origin, this causes a twist and results in the breakdown of the system (Bateson, 1987). Thus, a new transformation of the perception of the overlapping layers in the built environment can be opened up for new realms through the act of intervention: playing, stretching, and unfolding (Figures 9, 10, 11, 12). İstanbul needs a radical shift in the way of authorizing the application of housing policies. The city needs to be held as a livable and transformable space. Thus a new approach can be developed upon intervention in built reality.

By playing with the discovered realities, a dweller encounters a deeper reality of the built environment and thus takes a step closer to reacting or changing it. Understanding and awareness are steps to articulation. These different fragments or sections of urban life have totally different narratives, political, social, and economic environments in common. If the built space can interact with the dweller in many ways, then it requires participation in the city, or adaptation and sustainability of the meaning of the space. These dynamics create articulation of the dweller with the environment (Figure 13).
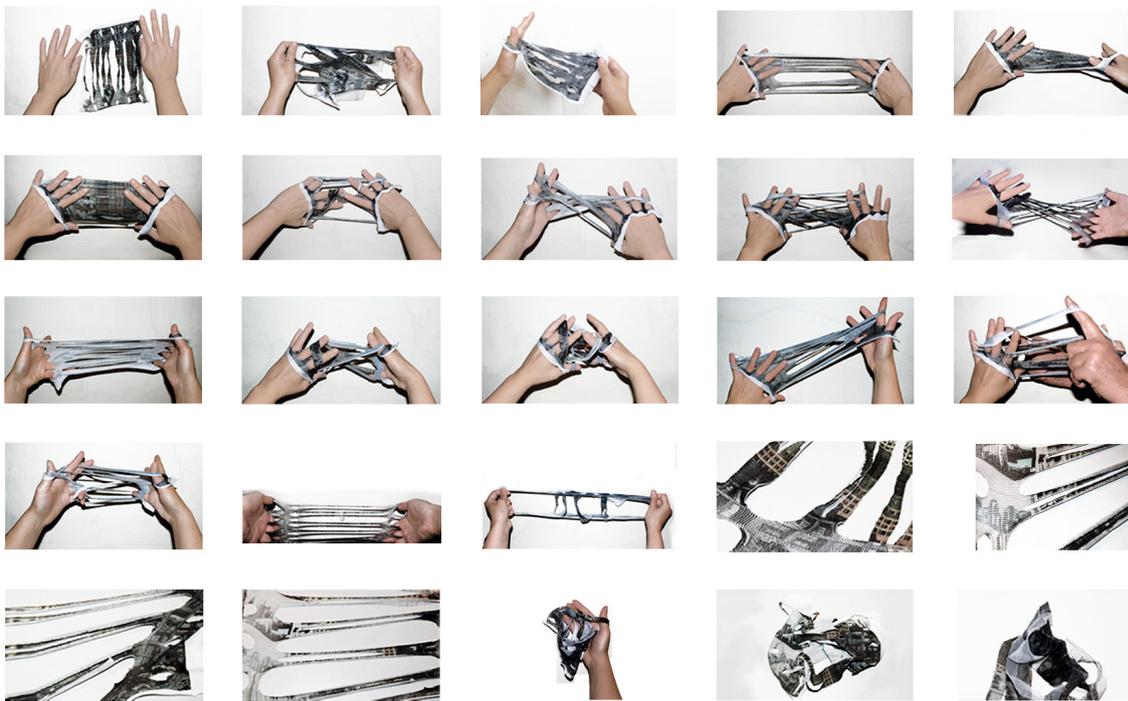

Figure 9. A random play experimenting a non-schismogenic attitude for the breakdown of the system.

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[2] Schismogenesis is a term defined by Gregory Bateson in his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. It refers to a pattern of social behavior which in certain cases, such as repetitive or mirroring behavior, causes a self-destruction of the system (Bateson, 1987).
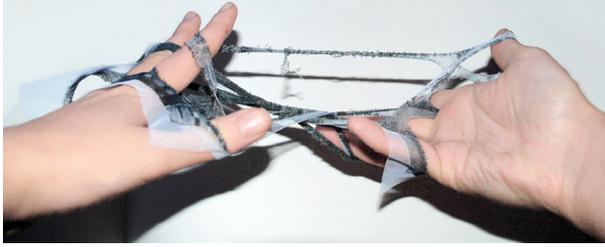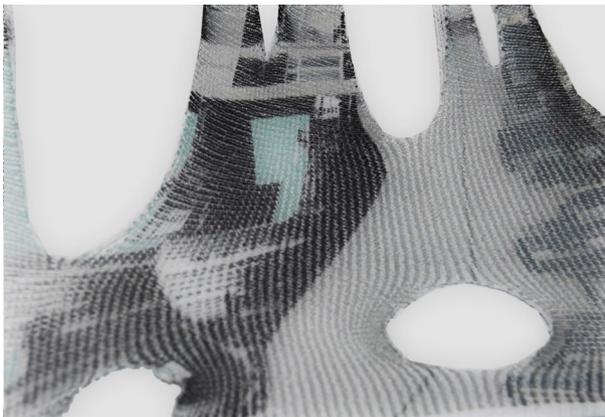
Conclusions

The contemporary city is a continuous cycle of flows of knowledge, matter, and energy—a city of flows and loops. A city is an integrated chaotic mechanism, a chain of events and related factors. Speed in the city becomes "both a relation between phenomena and that which determines the truth of their 'sudden appearance'", as Virilio says. The phenomena become a case for intervening in relations. The city is still unformed, and there is a flow of new encounters with new realities. In this city, complexity and self-organization are the causes of articulation problems between the dweller and the built environment. A hybrid or a rhizomatic city has a greater potential for creating articulation. Therefore, speed becomes, not a negative fragment of the dynamics in the city, but a trigger for transformation.

So, how can an approach be applied to real life to transform the negative effects of speed on urban housing? This approach is about understanding the dynamics of a self-growing and heterogeneous city and thus about improving a holistic approach. Firstly, this may be realized by improving a certain level of awareness of the built environment and its outcomes in a global world. This is done through understanding major interventions and urban transformation in which dwellers of the city are politically excluded. Secondly, a holistic approach can be developed using artistic expression for transforming urban life, activating urban initiatives and constructing a 'space' for dwellers enabling a non-schismogenic artistic expression.

How can a dweller transform his/her environment with a non-schismogenic act? Or how can one stretch rules in housing policies? For the İstanbul case, the answer to this question is ambiguous; however, we can find openings by developing a strategy that can approach and criticize multiple aspects of housing from each side. To understand the needs of dwellers, applying active participation, thinking metaphorically and evaluating speed as a boundary between resistance and play can be the key points. Setting up housing and urban platforms that engage dwellers in urban development and creating metaphorical plays can open up discussions for alternative existences in urban life. By metaphorical projection, we mean a non-schismogenic activity or artistic expression that pioneers and changes levels of housing perception of dwellers and authorities, respectively. A non-schismogenic act, regarding urban housing can be a reaction, that does not repeat the current rules of the condition of housing policies, but a way or approach that creates its own way, such a play with the daily life that is over-fictionalized between fragments in the built environment may be an opening to these questions.

Another alternative can be using artistic expression for transforming urban life through the foundation of housing platforms by dwellers, new ways of participation, such as participation through play in the city.

Figure 10. Stretching and unfolding reality as it is perceived. A metaphorical projection of methodology can be practiced with hands.

Figure 11. A starting point for a metaphorical approach towards changing urban life.

Figure 12. Stretching and unfolding reality as it is perceived.

Figure 13. Layers become jumbled: a new sense of meaning.

A non-schismogenic view depending on a holistic approach can be applied by understanding the dynamics of a hybrid city, grasping new meaning behind images and by finding a strategy to transform the image into an imageless urban presence. In this way, it may be possible to transform the negative traits of speed into an experiment for a better urban life.

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