The Agency of Cities

As Architects and Urban Designers, in the first instance interested in the particular qualities of constructed environment, the City is simultaneously a useful and elusive object. The agency of cities is inseparable from the agency of its systems and citizens, isn’t it? Does the city itself have agency to effect or direct change as a whole greater than the sum of its parts, or is agency distributed throughout its constituent parts, summoned and leveraged by socio-political agents? In order to locate the agency of cities we first need to establish what sort of useful and elusive object a City is.

Is a City an historical and material artefact providing a ground to be interpreted for constraints and justifications of new interventions?

Is a City a spatial manifestation of our political economy – a sanctimonious assertion of ‘good’ public space vs. unbridled and value-free play of private market forces?

Is a City a meaningful local arrangement of what we see – a set of built pieces, fabrics and mise en scene, or a set of spatial systems providing opportunities for interaction, transaction and exchange?

Is a City a result of its historicity – an accumulation of once useful, now sclerotic and merely habituated structures, or a place to fully support the lives we live and strive towards?

This session will posit a series of approaches toward apprehending the city, urbanism, and urban agency. Where is the agency of cities, and of design in cities? Who decides?