

Not-Habits

Habits

The thing about habits is that they tend to perpetrate material consequences, often for a very long time. Whether they are habits of thought, habits of practice, habits of dress, or habits in education, habits are easier than their opposite, not-habits, or resistance, disobedience, disruption. Habits provide a path and a nostalgic sense of certainty. They are reassuring, they are lazy, they become style. Then they become the norm. And sooner than anyone expected, habits become “the way we have always done things.” The norms invite their own company: metrics, accountability, evidence, periodic evaluations from experts in norms, and then the need for ingratiation with those experts.¹ More than a couple of these habits exist in architectural education and different corners of academia. Some have been deeply codified in our timetables, grading sheets, review protocols, hierarchies, and values. But the way we have always done things, the “ordinary deals and compromises,” as novelist Jonathan Lethem calls it, does not cut it right now.² As we contemplate the slow-motion, camera pan of shit hitting the fan everywhere at once and compute the costs of the future slamming into the human and material dimensions of our contemporary world, a collective thought has perhaps taken shape. Though simultaneously understood by many of us with increasing clarity, its slo-mo audio readout takes the form of a muffled, stretched-out, collective scream. It is impossible to conceive today that we do not want something other than the status quo.

Alternatives

For architecture schools, not doing things the way we have always done them might now mean having to stretch beyond our routine (and often smug) ways of dreaming up the future. It requires new alliances and more solidarity, and more than those: the convocation of a radical imagination.³ Radical imagination is not something one simply possesses. Its champions describe it as a set of collective practices, repeat attempts, and trials and errors in collective envisioning of radical systemic difference and all that is necessary to support it.

1. I am indeed invoking the way the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) rules, even if “new and improved,” tend to penetrate curricula with requests for evidence and formats and little faith in teachers, as well as the promotion and tenure processes that submit careers to institutional inertia, to farmed-out university press peer reviews and market viability assessments, and to the volatility of senior colleagues’ (of which I am now part) supplies of generosity and foresight. But also to more mundane things like: “We have always photographed models on black backgrounds,” or “We have always sent emails to confirm x.”

2. A few years ago, Jonathan Lethem posed a challenge to the then new president of Bennington College in which he described the school, set amid the rolling hills of Vermont – his and my own alma mater – as a type of “pocket-utopia.” His challenge was to think of utopia beyond the remoteness and natural beauty of those picturesque hills. In his proposal, and I believe this was a generational definition, utopia was the whisper of a possibility, a specter of hope for something other than the status quo. See Jonathan Lethem, “Inaugural Challenge,” in Bennington College, *The Inauguration of Mariko Silver*, April 26, 2004, <https://crossetlibrary.dspace.direct.org/bitstream/handle/11209/7500/InaugurationCeremonialProgram.pdf>.

3. For a discussion of “radical imagination” and its convocation, see Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven, “Outside but Along-Side: Stumbling with Social Movements as Academic Activists,” *Studies in Social Justice* 9 (December 2015): 18–33.

4. See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994). hooks advocates for teachers exposing and performing their full humanity, thus acknowledging as well as engaging the students' humanity, specificity, and differences. Equally important, she writes of the need to treat the classroom as a space dedicated to learning beyond facts, a space of testing and risk-taking, and a space in which students are enabled to critique the classroom itself.
5. I thus write here on behalf of the group as a pedagogue transformed by the experience. Though I will invoke a "we" that includes all of us, the opinions presented in this piece are my own.
6. Collective Architecture Studio was an extension of the Critical Broadcasting Lab that I direct at MIT, which meant that it operated not only with an awareness of the communicative economies that surround architecture but also with an expanded conception of architectural tools and interventions. Critical Broadcasting Lab's mission statement is available at <http://criticalbroadcast.net/>.
7. Following Tanja Petrović, who believes that referring to this area as Yugoslavia or ex-Yugoslavia is an important epistemological and political choice, I deliberately invoke Yugoslavia to portray our travel to Belgrade as a form of time travel. We went both to contemporary Belgrade and, simultaneously and self-consciously, to a former, historical version of Belgrade. See Tanja Petrović, "Towards an Affective History of Yugoslavia," *Filozofija i društvo* 27, no. 3 (October 2016): 504–20.
8. Following bell hooks, this was a self-aware offering of my own politics and complex relationship to the history of Yugoslavia, at the risk of my own position's dismantlement by the group. Some of this complexity is presented in greater detail in Ana Miljački, "Once Upon a Time in Yugoslavia," *Avery Review* 35 (December 2018), <http://averyreview.com/issues/35/once-upon-a-time>.

To transform the discipline in ways that our historical moment demands and co-imagine a radically different world, we might take a cue from one of the most important theorists of transgressive, engaged teaching: bell hooks. Twenty-five years ago, hooks called for experimental, embodied teaching to challenge habits – teaching that self-consciously cultivates utopia.⁴ A renewed focus on teaching in an architecture school (and elsewhere in academia) may be at odds with contemporary research universities that feverishly monetize world-saving research topics. But in a school that cultivates utopia, teaching is vital, engaged, and a site where our politics are performed in both form and content. Thus, teaching has to be a place where we challenge our own normalized views and behaviors and make sure we are not embracing, out of sheer habit, structures that perpetuate forms of domination we otherwise oppose. Teaching is not safer than research or practice. On the contrary, there are times when teaching has to be the site of far greater risk-taking. This is that time.

To search for tools that might help us crack open our deeply unsettling and unsatisfying now and point our imagination beyond the protocols that tend to reproduce the status quo, many experiments must be conducted at once. Many important questions need to be posed. There is room here for forms of measurable instrumentality, for politics and solidarity, but also for the nonutilitarian, the impractical, and the improvised. Prompted by our collective scream and for various biographical reasons, which, as bell hooks would insist, are more than mere footnotes here, in my role as a teacher I am compelled to ask: What would it mean to upend the cult of individual genius in architecture? To enable the intelligences, protocols, and values of the collective? What would it mean to sidestep the market? How do we transform the school itself in order to begin to test answers to these questions?

Comrades

Enter the Collective Architecture Studio, with Rodrigo Cesarman, Sydney Cinalli, Stratton Coffman, Boliang Du, Gabby Heffernan, Ben Hoyle, Eytan Levi, Catherine Lie, Ana Miljački, Yutan Sun, Marisa Waddle, and Sarah Wagner. It took place at MIT in the spring of 2019. Yes, it fit into the schedule of MIT's design studios, meeting twice a week from 1:00 to 5:00 pm; I was listed as the instructor, and it was part of my teaching load.⁵ The studio was assigned a less than ideal space on the fourth floor, and it abided by the key deadlines of the academic calendar: travel dates, midterm, final, grading.



On a historical architecture tour of New Belgrade with Jelica Jovanović (project coordinator for Do.co.mo.mo Serbia and one of the assistant curators for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Toward a Concrete Utopia"). Belgrade, 2019. Photo: Sarah Wagner. All images courtesy the author.

But many habits can be challenged even within such a framework, and we aimed to challenge as many as possible.⁶ Our collective studio asked: Who has agency to organize our space? What kind of space would a collective need to perform its best work, both for cultivating self-awareness (about assumptions, speaking turns, value of individual voices and efforts) and for collective design and production? Who should have agency to evaluate the fruits of its labor? Or the agency to guide it? Believing these questions were important, 10 students took on the risk of rewriting our roles and our expectations for each other. All kinds of risks lurk in upending habits. But in the context of teaching, which always requires trust flowing in both directions of the inevitably asymmetrical student-teacher relationship, risks too may need to be redistributed.

Together, we studied the architectural archives of, and eventually traveled to, the city where I grew up, Belgrade, Yugoslavia (Serbia), because I believe that dreams are still different in Belgrade and that different dreams can sometimes point the way to radical imagination.⁷ This seemingly obvious and perhaps banal decision about "studio travel" was also a way to make my own investment in the collective (both radical and nostalgic) available for the scrutiny of the Collective Architecture Studio.⁸ There was a time in Belgrade when architecture was made by collectives of architects and for

the collective good, or such was my own direct and cultural memory of that world. Because of that, and also prompted by the ominous shape of our planet's future prospects, I believe that the future will be collective or it won't be. Yet it seems that the possibility of radical imagination depends on a different kind of collective than what is presently supplied by our *communicative capitalism*, a term that political theorist Jodi Dean uses to encapsulate our neoliberal moment in which everyone and everything contribute to the constant flow of data and voices.⁹ The main characteristic of communicative capitalism is the fundamental separation of politics that circulate as "content" and politics as policy. As messages are generated and consumed at greater and greater velocities, their exchange value eclipses their use value and they increasingly contribute only to their own flow, thus shifting the experience of activism from truly engaged and transformative acts to a vague sense of contribution (to that stream of commentary). In order to begin to assemble radical imagination in this context, mutual interests or even "shared concerns" are not enough.¹⁰ In an oblique response to the effects of communicative capitalism, Dean offers comradeship (over alliance or friendship) as a unique social and political bond. Sharing concerns indeed brings us closer to comradeship, but it does not ensure it. In Dean's thesis, the comrade is a figure of belonging, with a mode of address in anticipating action.¹¹ A bond between comrades is not transactional; comrades stand together, focused on their shared political goal rather than on their legitimate and real differences or correspondences. That political goal precedes and structures the social bond. Leaning on the historical narrative of self-management and social ownership found in the archives of Yugoslavian architecture, the Collective Architecture Studio imagined comradeship as a mode of belonging, and from it, a form of political agency available for both architects and architecture.

Prompts

Consider, as we did, 1989: the magical year of Eastern European peoples, the triumph of democracy west of Moscow and east of the Elbe. Political economist Francis Fukuyama thought the fall of the wall marked "the end of history."¹² From then on, there would simply be nothing to motivate history's forward movement, only a perpetual present (global capitalism). Philosopher Jürgen Habermas thought the events of 1989 were a form of "rectifying revolution" that had finally placed Eastern European countries on the right path to becoming proper liberal

9. See Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1 (March 2005): 51–74.

10. In Bruno Latour's contemporary reworking of politics, the key concept motivating possible political allegiances is "a matter of concern." Individuals may share concerns with differently constituted and scaled collectives. For example, shared concerns are useful for rethinking political issues across national boundaries. The climate crisis is clearly such an all-encompassing matter of concern, but while this concept has the capacity to rewrite political boundaries on its own, it does not account for possible modes of organizing. See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 225–48.

11. Jodi Dean, "Four Theses on the Comrade," *e-flux journal* 86, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/160585/four-theses-on-the-comrade/>. I am grateful to my colleague Rania Ghosn for pointing me to Dean's work.

12. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

13. See Jürgen Habermas, "What does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left," *New Left Review* 183 (September/October 1990): 3–21.

14. See Boris Buden, *Zona prelaska: O kraju postkomunizma* (Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2012), and "Children of Postcommunism," *Radical Philosophy* 159 (January/February 2010): 18–25.

15. The Yugoslavian road to capitalism – the destruction of its socialist project and the key tenets of brotherhood, unity, and self-management – was far more contorted, bloody, and horrible than the mostly gentle revolutions of 1989. But the conceptual model of a "revolution in reverse" is nevertheless applicable to Yugoslavia, complicated as it was by the firing up of nationalism, which would eventually deliver its demise.

16. Belgrade architecture historians mourn the loss of knowledge that was accumulated in many of the large concrete prefab factories. The privatization of these factories also meant transforming products and the motivations for their manufacture.

democracies.¹³ He was not alone, of course; his position was only a public articulation of a widely shared understanding of the historical implications of efforts by Eastern Europeans to rid themselves of their oppressive regimes. More recently, Croatian philosopher Boris Buden, one of the most important commentators on the postsocialist transitions in former Yugoslavian countries and elsewhere, proposed that the concept of the Eastern European revolutions of 1989 as "revolutions in reverse" had infantilized the subjects of postsocialism everywhere.¹⁴ It also swiftly and decisively sent all of the then "freed" countries straight into transitions to global capitalism without assessing what their socialisms had achieved.¹⁵ Imagining 1989 to have aided Eastern Europe to catch up to the West also allowed the West to assume its own historical moment and trajectory toward communicative capitalism without question. Taking a deliberately opposite posture, the Collective Architecture Studio engaged the archives of Yugoslavian socialism and architecture as repositories of vitally important lessons and worked on reconfiguring and reviving fragments of old Belgrade and Yugoslavia-specific utopias, entire segments of disciplinary discourse, and local, sometimes forgotten, practical knowledge.¹⁶

Our semester was organized into three different interventions, progressively building up our collective knowledge of the context and our best ways of working together. Before traveling to Belgrade, our first challenge was to interpret to our ends the theoretical and historical material offered up by the context we were studying. Based on our findings, we made devices that challenged and augmented our own collective in the studio: an archive, protocols for working together, and tools for commoning. The full-scale tools for commoning included a reconfiguration of our work space, a game, and a collective garment. The studio space was reorganized to include a radio station, to facilitate groups working together, and to create room for collective decision-making. A wearable game, titled Balls for All, recast the key theoretical tenets of "self-management" into four "levels of difficulty." It rendered bodies partially (and comically) immobile yet connected by a circular fabric with five body sleeves and a collective collar. This malleable, responsive fabric "court" contained six holes, one in front of each player, and one in the middle. The goal was to collectively, through different forms of cooperation (involving jumping and moving in space), place a series of 10 balls into specific holes at each of the four levels of the game. The players either won or lost as a collective. Another commoning tool was a collective garment that

Collective Architecture Studio playing Balls for All. MIT, 2019. Game contents: five body sleeves, one playing field, five object holes, one pit of entropy. Photo: Ben Hoyle.



combined various examples of costumes from the history of parades and protests in Belgrade and referenced the ubiquitous red scarves of socialist youth. The vibrantly red, piecemeal garment, with zippered edges, enabled different forms of wearing as individuals and the collective negotiated a multiplicity of possible group forms. Our one-to-one commoning devices were each a physical manifestation of and experiment with the historical and contemporary Belgrade material we were studying. They were collectively authored, playful confirmations of our learning – embodying and broadcasting our understanding of history as well as the complexities of our contemporary moment. They spliced respect with projection, interwove understanding with irony, and invited others to join in.¹⁷ Their making and performance at MIT, and then again in Belgrade, confirmed a form of translatability across historical and geopolitical contexts, while their performative dimension, to our delight, sidestepped the usual expert judgment of singularly authored studio work.

As our second challenge, we entered an urgent conversation on the fate of a major park, called Ušće, in New Belgrade.¹⁸ We did this by producing preemptive competition entries for a site that has received, like a giant urban cinema screen, a number of differently ideologically slanted projections over the last half century.¹⁹ While the Collective Architecture Studio was learning about the planning and construction of New Belgrade at MIT, the Belgrade city government was cutting down trees in Ušće, preparing the ground to receive a set of corrupt, nonsensical actions designed to benefit a few individuals financially at the expense of historical heritage, parks on both sides of the river Sava, and citizens' sense of agency and care for their city. We were rethinking

17. We did not simply eat up socialism's own self-descriptions that dominate the archives. For those in the know, it might be relevant that we started the semester watching Dušan Makavejev's 1971 cult film, *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, available in the US from the Criterion Collection.

18. New Belgrade was Yugoslavia's largest experiment in housing and planning. The park was a constitutive part of New Belgrade, the socialist, federal capital of Yugoslavia, imagined across the river from the old Belgrade.

19. We were told by a number of Belgrade urbanists that a new competition for the park was in preparation, and we intended to contribute to it as the Collective Architecture Studio. As we launched the studio in February 2019, the acting city architect's mandate was ended, and he was replaced when we were drafting our three different entries for the park.

Collective Architecture Studio presents its Collective Garment in the gallery Kolektiv. Belgrade, 2019. Photo: Sarah Wagner.



20. We were most directly engaged with Jelica Jovanović, Ljiljana Blagojević, Ljubica Slavković, Dejan Sretenović, Andrej Dolinka, Iva Čukić, and Jovana Timotijević, who introduced us to a number of bottom-up, nongovernmental initiatives, including KC Magacin, Kvaka 22, temporary “Workers’ Museum Trudbenik,” and to Dobrica Veselinović, one of the leaders of the Ne Davimo Beograd (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own) campaign and movement. Thanks to Dejan Sretenović and Senka Latinović, we presented our Commoning Devices in the gallery Kolektiv in Belgrade.

21. See Dubravka Sekulić, *Glitz Nicht So Romatisch! On Extralegal Space in Belgrade* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012). Sekulić draws a link between early forms of “wild construction” and contemporary large-scale scams. Various economic forces – even before the mass privatization of housing in the 1990s – sponsored forms of wild, illegal construction to which the state consistently turned a blind eye. New construction on the unregulated outskirts of Belgrade as well as the construction of extensions and adaptations to modernist and other housing stock were symptomatic of the great need for housing and the only economically viable models for building and procuring housing. In the last decade, however, legalizing illegal construction has been scaled up from individual and minor developers to large, shady public-private partnerships. As the transition to liberal capitalism has progressed, land too has been privatized. The Serbian Privatization Agency, having turned many self-managed enterprises into private, often foreign, properties over the last 14 years, ceased to exist in 2016, signaling an end of the transition to full-fledged capitalism.

the park so that we could offer other options for conversation. Our design efforts also accelerated the studio’s understanding of the context, helping us take measure of various agents that have been involved in shaping the city, while also registering our own capacity, as experts from MIT, to influence trajectories and conversations. The fact that this context was foreign to most members of the Collective Architecture Studio meant that the local political struggle over the context allegorically paralleled the studio’s collective struggle to understand it. Once this phase was over, we packed up our game, our garments, and our competition entries for the park and traveled to Belgrade.

Once in Belgrade, the Collective Architecture Studio expanded to include local activists who champion cultural memory of social ownership and a series of experiments in self-management.²⁰ The activists’ own comradeship was palpable in every configuration of their squatted, productive, and cultural proto-institutions. They invited us to imagine comradeship with them and on behalf of the right to housing and the right to the city, not only in Belgrade, but everywhere. The clarity of their, and by extension our, collective “enemy” (a highly corrupt, anti-intellectual, populist government, its friends and family, all engaged in feverishly capitalizing on privatizing and reverting back to capitalism all remnants of self-management) shed light on our own local developer government.

Finally, after our visit to the city and working with some of Belgrade’s urban historians and activists, we considered the ramifications and the legacy of the “right to housing” put forward by the first Yugoslavian Forum on Housing and Construction in 1956.²¹ In a self-managed society, housing was a social responsibility, and land too was socially (not



View of Block 23 in New Belgrade, built in 1974 and designed by Aleksandar Stjepanović, Božidar Janković, and Branislav Karadžić. Belgrade, 2019. Photo: Eytan Levi.

22. As soon as the idea of the Belgrade Waterfront (Beograd na Vodi) development began to circulate, opposition to it began to organize, but it was not until 2015 and the demolition of the Savamala neighborhood – done in part at night by men in masks, including a violent beating to death of a witness – that large-scale protests began. Led by Ne Davimo Beograd, various citizen organizations joined in. Since then, Ne Davimo Beograd has organized many counteractions, always in dialogue with the latest nonsensical or egregious acts of the government. When we visited the city, the protests, now dubbed One in Five Million, included a large number of citizen coalitions.

state) owned. Imagine that. Imagine us imagining that. When homes and land are socially owned, they are not subject to the speculative market. There can hardly be a more powerful register of systemic difference that also has a direct expression in architecture and city form. However, in the aftermath of the 1990s campaign to privatize all housing (and industry and eventually all land) in Yugoslavia, then Serbia, no provision remained for any form of affordable or social housing.

In the context of the current housing shortage and urban transformations in the name of postsocialist liberal capitalism, a large-scale, public-private operation titled Belgrade Waterfront has triggered sustained protest by a new generation of architects and urbanists and the general population.²² Belgrade Waterfront promised to bring 3.4 billion euros to the city, and was thus deemed of national importance by the government, which rushed to clear the legal, physical, and human obstacles in its way, including the city's primary, historic rail station. Once construction began, the investment was scaled back to 140 million euros, with significant infrastructure expected from the state. With a keen awareness of this project and all that it epitomizes, and in order to offer specific solutions, we relied on a tool, developed by our comrades at the Ministry of Space, called "spacebook," which collects all unused sites and sites in ownership disputes. We

Collective Architecture Studio visiting the demolished Central Rail Station, with a view of the Belgrade Waterfront project, joined and guided by the Ne Davimo Beograd activist Dobrica Veselinović. Belgrade, 2019. Photo: Sarah Wagner.



23. We met members of Ko Gradi Grad (Who Builds the City) in Belgrade and discussed their ideas about collective financing. For the group's log of activities, see <https://www.kogradigrad.org/>. An English language interview with one of the Ko Gradi Grad and Pametnija Zgrada (Smarter Building) organizers, Ana Džokić, is available at <https://thefunambulist.net/podcast/ana-dzokic-politics-of-space-and-architecture-in-belgrade>.

24. *Kolektiv* is the Serbian term for the collective, and it caught on. The Collective Architecture Studio slowly and spontaneously adopted it for designating itself, with slight and necessary irony in response to the most earnest aspects of socialist realism we found in the archive, but also with delight in speaking with an accent, recognizing our foreignness in the context in which we were operating.

also studied the existing local activists' proposals for cooperative financing.²³ In conversations with these initiatives, the Collective Architecture Studio offered a set of alternatives to the dominant modes of housing production. Our housing proposals were presented in housing "pattern books" and as physical models, ready to send to both city authorities and citizen groups. They included a range of adaptive reuse and bottom-up proposals for sites in Belgrade that have been in long-term ownership limbo or are still socially or publicly owned. We considered methods of financing that might seed the reinvention of systemic aid, if not total transformation. Our projects were conceived not only as proposals but also as discursive props for groups, in the context of Belgrade and beyond. They were complex manifestations of retro and forward thinking about and with architecture and the collective.

Not-Habits

The Collective Architecture Studio's cultivation of comradeship with local historians, activists, and architects challenged our deeply engrained work habits and formats in architecture and pedagogy. The final event marking the end of our studio experiment – imagined and organized by our learning *kolektiv* – was a conversation in which many key hierarchies of a studio review were turned upside-down.²⁴ Our guests

were invited to participate and to experience with us how hard it is to resist the juridical call of the presentation format, even when nearly everything in it is upended except for the email invitation to a “final review.” We shared our communing devices in action, momentarily transforming our guests into members of our collective. We systematically removed the hierarchies commonly inherent in final juries: specific authorship, privileged expertise, and the finality of our proposals. We introduced instead more collective and more intimate modes of talking about our efforts. Our guest interlocutors did not know the risks they took in joining our studio’s final event, and yet their ability to reprogram the nature of their remarks in real time was a testament to their generosity and openness to change. Change is possible. If we don’t challenge the habits that shape our work, we will fail to transform our discipline in the ways our historical moment demands.

Working in the context of our Belgrade comrades’ hope to recapture and shape urban and construction processes on behalf of the citizens was transformative. It has enabled us to imagine alternatives to the real estate scams and the rapid construction in cities everywhere. Since we were able to co-imagine change and contribute to the process of cultivating a radical imagination in Belgrade, perhaps we will now have the tools to do the same here and elsewhere. Equally important is the lived memory – for all members of the Collective Architecture Studio – of negotiating, cultivating, and working as a collective, and as a result, experiencing together the collective transformation of habits. Our collective experience broke the inertia of habits, providing the clarity necessary for new comrades to step out of the flow of messages and reconnect political content to action, both as citizens and as architects.

Ana Miljački is a historian, theorist, educator, and curator of architecture, and an associate professor of architecture at MIT, where she directs the Critical Broadcasting Lab.