



REORIENTXPRESS

REORIENTXPRESS is a journey of dialogues with designers and other actors involved in the process of transformations of the 'urban' environments.

It is an itinerant project across South and East Asia to implement interdisciplinary debate about the changes driven by globalization and by the increasing struggle to support perpetual growth, at a turning point after modernism and its full deconstruction.

The dialogues concentrate on specific themes that are key in the 'urban age', focusing on dichotomies of concepts that usually reveal different approaches between East and West. Putting them on equal footing, the project tries to reconsider frozen positions and envision potential future scenarios.

Through the collection of a series of fragments and their retrospective interpretation, it aims to give a 'holistic view' to approach this critical moment in urban dynamics.

The collective transnational debate aims to document and put together a sort of expanded self-consciousness on the nature and state, speed and scale of these deep changes.



DICHOTOMIES

In the age of hyper-specialization, which supports a working model 'productively' divided in always smaller and highly specific tasks, it is necessary to acquire a broader overview in order to connect apparently unrelated phenomena. To achieve this objective the project proposes a 'tomographic' strategy, a collection of different fragments on vast territories and arguments. The combination of these contributions, along specific themes, will define cross culture and cross climate sections, to reconstruct the 'model' of fast transforming Asia.

The themes will be suggested in the form of 'dichotomies', topics where it's hard to clearly define a 'right' position and where there is still a consolidated difference of opinions between East and West or between modernism and beyond. With the belief that complex systems cannot be represented anymore by frozen 'oppositions', the project aims to stimulate debate in search for new states of equilibrium, questioning postures too often given for granted.

DICHOTOMIES :

PLANNED INFRASTRUCTURE / INFORMAL ASSEMBLAGE

Now fully entered in the 'urban age' many cities of the global South are growing in the lack or deficiency of traditional urban planning. At the same time among planners and designers the interest in informality is rising but informal fascination often result in a formally planned 'improved' solution.

GLOBAL DISPLACEMENTS / VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS

Global economy is provoking unprecedented migrations mostly towards cities, causing the reinforcement of frontiers and the appearance of new borders, while information technologies enable simultaneous connection with the rest of the globe 24/7, dissolving physical distances and creating virtual connected communities.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY / 'RENDERED' SOCIETY

Imaginary is made up of different components that are partly experienced (locally embedded), and partly fantastic (projected). Everyone's memory is the interplay of personal and collective backgrounds, but in the era of global information the processes behind it are more and more articulated. "Rendered" alien models are slowly inserted in daily routines, making difficult to recognize who are the real strangers.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION / BRAND-NEW DEVELOPMENT

Preservation mostly concentrates on exceptional objects, without considering the generic and immaterial qualities of built environment, generally lost during 're-development' process together with related collective memories. Also pure conservation generates uncertain consequences, as renovation is necessary to avoid atrophy. Radical stasis and radical development coexists today without a strategy to negotiate their encounters.

VERNACULAR EVOLUTION / TECHNICAL INNOVATION

Vernacular architectures respond to local environments while embodying cultural and aesthetic references and slowly evolving through collective improvement. On the other side, the search for innovation has always been a crucial requirement for practitioners but, many times, it is mostly focused on individual goals (imagination-driven-originality) or technical advances, forgetting a wider range of factors embedded in traditional architecture.

MODERNITY STEADINESS / VULNERABLE REALITIES

Modernity, with its 'dominating' and 'homogenizing' approach, has always rejected vulnerability as cultural and aesthetic principle but, paradoxically, it has contributed to its formation exploiting the environment to sustain its growing system. With global crisis its time to promote a wider sense of ecology that supports different 'standards' and qualities like resilience, adaptation and impermanence.

PROGRESS FUEL / EXPLOITED LANDSCAPE

In the Anthropocene, the era where humans have relevant impact on the planet ecosystems, the net division between natural and artificial, set by modernity, has to be deeply reconsidered. It's necessary to culturally and critically reconnect to the landscapes that have been altered to sustain our development, usually far from our comfortable cities and invisible to the most, and to speculate on their (and ours) possible futures.

BOTTOM-UP INNOVATION / TOP-DOWN EFFICIENCY

The diffusion of interactive network technologies, especially through 'bottom-up' protocols, has increased exponentially the possibilities of connection and information access, offering citizens methods to intervene in urban process. Nonetheless conventional 'top down' management and planning structures remain, as necessary agents to pursue long-term objectives. Cities are developing as complex ecosystems embracing both bottom up and top down systems, searching for a fine balance between innovation and efficiency.

PRACTICE PRAGMATIC/EXPANDED ENGAGEMENT

In the current Asian economic & developing climate, conventional architecture practice, focusing mostly on "designing buildings" seems to be both necessary and valuable but the dominant logic of private investments leaves little room for exploration. On the other hand the countries deep inequalities, unbalanced transformations and fragile communities call for alternatives approaches to the profession.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

'The future is already here, but it is just not very evenly distributed'

W.GIBSON

Considering the scenery and imaginary of Blade Runner we could argue that Ridley Scott thought that future was already happening in Hong Kong.

In 1994 the visionary sci-fi genius William Gibson had ironically criticized the other peculiar Asian city-state of Singapore. In his well-known article "Disneyland with Death penalty" he briefly highlighted the awkward mixture of leisure, 'softness' and strictness of its organisation.

Many consider that the tiny island-state on the equator, which is now one of the most active hubs of global finance, is a very peculiar experimental laboratory where we might find a materialization of a possible 'future'.

Singapore becomes the starting point of an exploration around South and East Asia to collect visions, reflections, evidences, strategies and suggestions that could help understand the present dynamics and visualize potential scenarios as a critical act, rather than predicting a doomed evolution.

The journey will take place in Asia as a continent with extreme density, facing deep and fast transformations. Asia hosts today half of the world population and more than half of the global cities that have exceeded 10 million people.

CHANGE

According to some scenarios of the famous projections in 'The limits of growth' by MIT in 1972, oil and mineral resources would be in deep scarcity by now. The world could have actually ended in 2012 according to Maya astrological predictions, and the carbon emissions of the developed countries could have halved if the Kyoto protocol had been attended.

None of these happened, but since the past decade several radical changes are taking place around the world at growing rhythms, especially in Asia, where the speed and scale of environmental transformations are unprecedented.

The banal comparison of average consumption rates around the world, e.g. between Nevada and Inner Mongolia, that populated any article about the future of the planet in the past decade, used to end with terrific scenarios in the unfortunate case that the habits of the so-called 'developed world' were embraced by a consistent portion of the world population. Now those possibilities are becoming real.

With its irresistible appeal, consumerism is highly contagious and, under the incentive of the West, is expanding to the entire globe. The effects are highly visible, habits and relations have been deeply transformed until the scale of everyday life.

HOLISTIC VIEW

Given the extreme complexity of today's reality and the trend of considering hyper specialization as central 'progress driver', it is quite uncommon to pursue a holistic approach to study environmental transformations, but it is somehow even more necessary.

Working at 'big scale' usually implies simplifications but rigor is not a priority if the overall objective is to integrate fragmented knowledge. Cities can be useful in this process, as microcosms they can be approached to visualize wider phenomena and as heuristic fields they can be studied to evaluate experience-based strategies.

WEST-REST

For more than 1000 years the West has monopolized the process of 'modernization' building up a paradigm of certainties with clearly defined objectives, like endless rational progress, that for long time have never been questioned in their core assumptions.

As Bruno Latour sharply analysed, the concept of western 'modernity' had been idealized and artificially organized to be a unitary and complete paradigm with the sole monopoly of progress. It has always been opposed to all the 'rest', the outside world, considered as a plurality of heterogeneous cultures totally external to any modernization and usually reduced to heritage against a common global present.

In the new millennium, the sole economical predominance of the west has rapidly vanished, and at the same time the 'Western way', based on liberal democracy, capitalism and lay nationalism, has lost its self-assigned ideological supremacy.

Now the world has switched to a polycentric reality, where multiple different political organizations and systems coexist almost on the same level, however the high degree of interdependence prevents anyone to move independently.

With the advent of globalization the capitalist market is the only real constant that has rapidly extended to the whole planet, imposing its unbeatable logics of profit by evaluating any decision in economical terms.

TURNING POINT

For a few decades post-modern thought has questioned the previous paradigm and criticized its foundations and principles by acknowledging the complexity and fragmented multiplicity of reality, previously been over-simplified.

However, the antithetical nature of postmodern thought prevents it from becoming the foundation of 'new paradigms'.

Latour has outlined an interesting potential evolution in the recognition of multiple and heterogeneous complexes of cultures and rationalities that would dialogue without strictly defined hierarchies.

This kind of interactions would require more 'diplomatic' positions for all thinkers and practitioners, extending the practice of political mediation to other fields.

BIG RE-THINK

Architects, designers and planners, despite a growing presence in the media, compared to just a few decades back, have less relevance in the key decisions regarding the shaping and organisation of the built environment.

The media industry has happily absorbed and celebrated the fields of design, pulling them towards fashionable and 'lifestyle' sectors, while the increasing weight of economy and private investments contributed to diminish, if not fully eliminate, the role of guidance and conceptual overview.

It's time to re-think the foundations of design practice and its objectives within the society to become more politically relevant and to redirect a consistent amount of research energies that are too often spent on epidermic aspects.



DIALOGUES

"I thought the twenty-first century would be, hopefully, more like a dialogue, more like conversation, and maybe that in itself is a kind of manifestation or whatever. I am very careful in even using that word. I just think the twentieth century was so sure of itself, and I hope that the twenty-first century will be less sure. And part of that is to listen to what other people say and to enter into a dialogue, to not stand up and immediately declare one's intent."

Tino Sehgal, quoted by Hans Ulrich Obrist in *Manifestos for the Future*

The age of grand narratives is arguably over and it is necessary to identify a genre able to be flexible, more informal and agile, without becoming necessarily too fragmented.

Dialogue has always been used in the most diverse contexts from Plato's dissertations to contemporary journalism, giving the unusual possibility of covering highly heterogeneous subjects.

DESIGNERS & CO

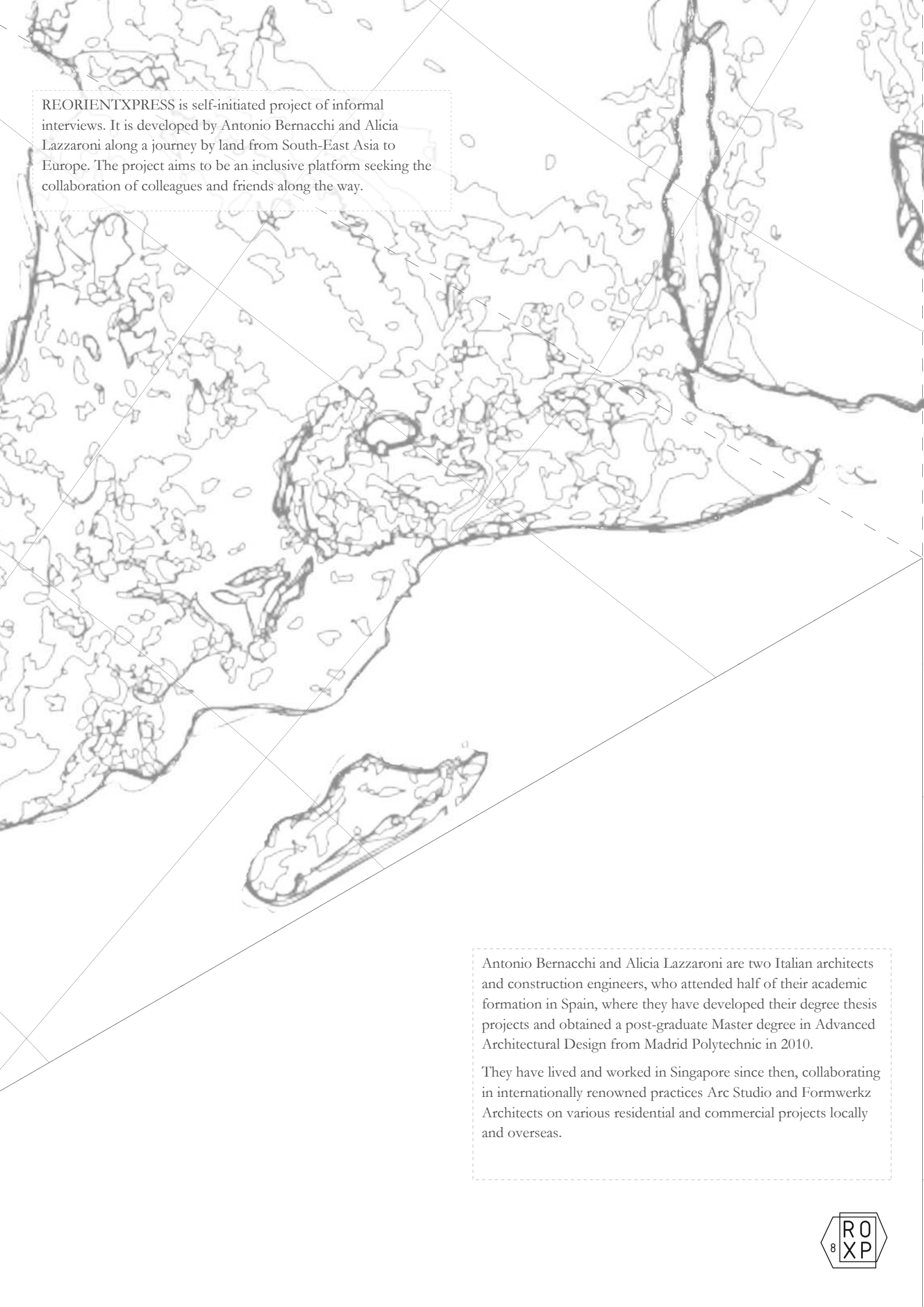
"[Design is] ...the ability to think holistically about problems as opportunities and apply a systematically critical method to create and explore solutions."

Bruce Mau

Designers have the ability to approach problems in broader terms, elaborate alternative points of view and synthesize the multiple variables of complex realities. They have potential to solve problems beyond the production of objects and buildings using the same abilities of orchestration, scale management, detailing, strategy, contextualization, abstraction, communication and decision-making.

A challenge for the future is to drive these capabilities towards wider objectives.

Designers and the professionals at the edge of design disciplines are the right figures to share their vision, because actively involved in the transformation processes.



REORIENTXPRESS is self-initiated project of informal interviews. It is developed by Antonio Bernacchi and Alicia Lazzaroni along a journey by land from South-East Asia to Europe. The project aims to be an inclusive platform seeking the collaboration of colleagues and friends along the way.

Antonio Bernacchi and Alicia Lazzaroni are two Italian architects and construction engineers, who attended half of their academic formation in Spain, where they have developed their degree thesis projects and obtained a post-graduate Master degree in Advanced Architectural Design from Madrid Polytechnic in 2010.

They have lived and worked in Singapore since then, collaborating in internationally renowned practices Arc Studio and Formwerkz Architects on various residential and commercial projects locally and overseas.