CRITICAL PRACTICE IN AN AGE OF COMPLEXITY - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Decolonizing spatial practice: Critical insights in the agency of landscape in post-disaster recovery

• Format:
verbal presentation

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• Abstract (300 words):
The paper explores the agency of small-scale tactical physical interventions in the imagination, development and implementation of alternative socio-ecological futures in post-disaster communities, and models ‘critical spatial practices’ that are capable of developing viable alternatives to the capital-hegemonial-colonial processes of redevelopment.

The post- Hurricane Katrina recovery of the Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans, a community characterized by a long history of systematic discrimination and equally long tradition of resistance, exemplifies the struggle of marginalized communities in the context of social and environmental injustices revealed and exacerbated by disasters. The author and his students, in a multi-year cooperation with local communities, conceived and built a small, tactical and critical intervention that physically located the discourses on how to live in an environment characterized by recurring threats
originating in the interaction of cultural and natural systems. It was exceptionally successful in creating the only public space and "forum" in the Lower 9th Ward that allowed subaltern publics to assert themselves.

It catalyzed the development of identity and self-assertion of a traumatized community, facilitating its successful resistance against the dominant strategies of neo-liberal, growth-oriented urban redevelopment and centralized flood control. It empowered the Lower 9th Ward to assert its 'right to the city', and to participate in the discourses on its own future by modeling new socio-ecological assemblages, suggesting a prominent role for spatial tactics based in local traditions of spatial and spatialized resistance, whose success is located in what Hou (2010) labels “insurgent planning (...) purposeful actions that aim to disrupt the domineering relationships of oppressors to the oppressed, and destabilize such a status quo through consciousness of the past and imagination of alternative futures.” These critical spatial practices transcend the prevalent neoliberal rhetorics of sustainability and resilience and model how to decolonize the processes of the (re-)development of urban space.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Joern Langhorst is an Associate Professor in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver. Previously he has held faculty positions at the University of Oregon and Iowa State University. His research and teaching focus on theories of space, place and landscape, on media theory and issues of visualization and representation, emphasizing film, and on post-industrial and post-disaster sites with a focus on the cultural production of space. A particular emphasis is on post-industrial post-colonial and post-disaster cities and their mechanisms of de-development and re-development. He has been consulting on the recovery and redevelopment of post-disaster and post-industrial sites nationally and internationally, with a particular emphasis on the role of emergent technologies, alternative processes and the relationships between traditional and new actors and agents.