

NINE QUARTER CITY

Faculty of Architecture,
The University of Sydney



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The theoretical project *Nine Quarter City* is a sustained collective meditation on the contemporary city. It takes its cues from Noli and Piranesi, Stirling, Rowe, Hejduk and Woods. Fragments of the ground plans of nine actual cities (Dubrovnik, Madrid, Isfahan, Tunis, Tokyo, Bern, Venice, Jerusalem and New York) have been fused with an abstract street grid of strict geometry. They are abutted non-discriminately and are stabilized by two major diagonal axes, one a land axis (boulevard) and the other a water axis (canal). The result is a vast urban conglomerate of nine distinct city quarters that are at once familiar and unique. Each quarter comprises sixteen adjacent blocks of identical size (84 x 55 dm, or A3 at 1:200). Every one of the 144 blocks has been developed by a different individual as a speculative architectural proposition.

The superimposition of the abstract grid onto the original city plans is a fundamental act of disruption. The original urban layout is retained as a vivid memory, yet accidental, unanticipated conditions appear and demand attention. Boulevards, roads, streets, lanes and alleys overlap, violate and complement each other. Urban squares, neighbourhood parks and intimate courtyards appear, at once incidental, contrary and plausible.

The heavily reduced figure-ground plan served as the basis for the initial stages of design undertaken as a 'conversation' with the members of the quarter. Research was conducted into the distinctive cultural and physical characteristics of the original cities in order to begin to reinvest vitality into the plans. The characteristic topographic and environmental conditions of each city were documented, as were the typical building materials and techniques. An array of representations of the cities in a range of media provided frames of reference: painting and literature, historical plans, first-hand experience, satellite images, postcards and tourist guidebooks. The concern at this stage was equally with the physical and mimetic context, and collages of perceptions and interpretations were produced to initiate the creative process of design.

Individuals were charged with elaborating on the basic plan, determining a range of buildings that might be appropriate for their quarter of the city, then deciding on a specific program for their own block and developing a concrete architectural proposal for one building. They investigated the potential richness of multiple architectural works communicating across a civic topography. This architectural conversation could be from one side of the block to the other, through the site or at discrete moments of connection. There were constant negotiations: whether or not to accept or decline a request to continue a significant gesture across boundaries, the completion of a square, the continuation or termination of a path, or the syno- pation of a row of columns.

Where the limit of one individual architectural proposal commences and another concludes has become difficult to discern, presenting new combinations of urban architectural interactions. The assembly of projects became an autonomous architectural work, with accidents and non-intentional built fragments and spaces provoking further architectural response. *Nine Quarter City* began to build its own context and its own history as the original host city ceded importance to the newly imagined one. Groups began to forge their own community and negotiate their own rules for urban and architectural actions.

As can be seen in the large master drawing and model developed collectively at 1:200 (overall dimensions 504cm x 356cm), the rigor of the initial framework combined with the liberty of individuals to design to programs of their choosing resulted in an abundant, intricately woven and highly articulated architectural topography. Densely layered spatially and programmatically, it asserts the principle that the cultural, political, ethical and aesthetic interests of a community and its creative and attentive individuals can reinforce one another. The project recognises and celebrates that fact that a city is rarely the product of a single directive. It is a palimpsest of initiatives and responses: the rich and evolving result of conflict, negotiation, co-operation and creativity.

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