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From Overlooked Contexts to Territories of Opportunity

Abstract

This research questions the role of architects and spatial practitioners in overlooked territories and decentered contexts characterized by uncertainty and limited governance yet shaped by the potential for more prosperous and dignified futures. Rather than treating these territories as peripheral or exceptional, the project recognizes them as sites where resilience, informal innovation, and new forms of collaboration are already underway. It asks how spatial, and design practices can meaningfully engage with these conditions through situated, collaborative, and adaptive approaches.

Focusing on Colombia as a case study, particularly the Oriente Antioqueño region, the research explores territories shaped by displacement, ecological pressure, infrastructural fragmentation, and ongoing return processes. These settings challenge dominant planning categories and call for new spatial tools and frameworks grounded in situated knowledge, iterative engagement, and long-term collaboration. The aim is to develop design methods that operate within these territorial dynamics while supporting locally rooted processes of transformation.

Methodologically, the research combines Action Research, Pluriversal Methodologies, and Assemblage Ethnography to engage with complexity across multiple fronts. It draws on participatory mapping, scenario-building, spatial prototyping, and collaborative design to reveal invisible dynamics, support negotiation, and co-produce spatial responses. These tools are developed through practice and refined through direct collaboration with territorial actors.

Grounded in both field-based work and institutional platforms at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and ETH Zurich, the project explores how spatial practices can be tested and reimagined through the development of strategies, scenarios, and collaborative tools. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to a broader shift in how design disciplines engage with territorial realities, supporting not only technical responses but also new imaginaries and forms of collective capacity.

Research Project Description

"...And what is at stake are 'territories'—but understood in their broad material, epistemic, cultural, and ontological conception. In this context, it is important to think about strategies for the defense of territories across multiple registers and scales." (Escobar, 2025, p. 587)

Today's global conditions present unprecedented possibilities for creating opportunities for collective prosperity and dignified lives. These include access to instant communication networks, international cooperation mechanisms, renewable energy innovations, geographic information systems (GIS), and open-source knowledge platforms, among others. Alongside a growing awareness of our shared planet, these possibilities are shaped and expanded by the acknowledgment of pluriversal cultural practices, evolving understandings of ecological interdependence, and the strengthening of networks grounded in collaboration, care, and co-creation (Angélil & Siress, 2019; Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 173; Escobar, 2018, p. 151; "Return (S)," 2022, p. 53).

Yet we face deepening uncertainty, shaped by escalating global challenges such as socio-political instability, environmental degradation, forced migration, and widening inequalities, that transform how

territories are inhabited, governed, and contested (Soederberg & Walks, 2018). These pressures are intensified by uneven practices of extraction, accumulation, and control, supported by systems that fragment territory, concentrate resources, and disrupt collective agency (Hernández, 2011, p. 54).

These overlapping challenges and uneven practices cross administrative boundaries, blur spatial divisions, and extend beyond the reach of institutional systems, revealing the limits of existing governance and spatial planning frameworks (Marston, 2005, p. 417). At the same time, inherited categories such as urban and rural, center and periphery, or developed and underdeveloped fail to reflect the complexity of regions shaped by these dynamics (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 152; Kanai & Schindler, 2018, p. 4). These conceptual distinctions often obscure conditions where multiple pressures converge (Mahon & Keil, 2009, p. 43), including post-conflict regions, territories of return, urban margins shaped by displacement, and areas where formal and informal governance intersect (Salazar, 2023).

Far from being peripheral, these territories are shaped by resilient practices, resourceful innovations, climate adaptation strategies, and community-based forms of collaboration even amid structural neglect, environmental pressures, and limited governance capacity. These decentered contexts challenge dominant planning categories and reveal overlooked narratives that demand new tools and approaches for spatial engagement (Kanai & Schindler, 2018, p. 5; Stienen, 2020, p. 287).

What, then, is the role of architects, designers, and researchers in such overlooked and decentered contexts? How can we engage in places marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and conflict? How can spatial practitioners intervene in or transform territories with limited governance reach and scarce resources?

This research builds on these questions and is grounded in the realities of overlooked and decentered territories, contexts where overlapping crises, institutional absences, and community-led practices coexist. It approaches territory not as a fixed or administratively bounded unit but as a dynamic and contested field, structured through negotiation, layered temporalities, and intersecting systems of relation (Elden, 2005, p. 9; Halvorsen, 2019, p. 795; Mahon & Keil, 2009, p. 38). These include, for example, the production and distribution of food, energy, housing, and labor; the interdependence of built and ecological infrastructures such as mobility, water, and basic services; and the support of cultural practices, networks of care, strategies for resistance, and forms of collective life (Escobar, 2018, p. 159). Such territories are not governed by a single logic but emerge through entangled conditions where possibilities for collaboration, sustainability, and design innovation unfold alongside protracted displacement, fragmented governance, ecological pressures, and informal modes of inhabitation (Schmid, 2015).

Thus, the central objective of this research is to reimagine the role of architects and urban designers in these contexts by developing a situated methodological framework for engaging with complex territorial conditions (Klumpner et al., 2024). This framework builds on design-led practices that operate within dynamic and contested environments, where spatial, social, and institutional conditions are continuously negotiated.

Over the past years, I have worked across Colombia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, developing tools for spatial and scenario-based design prototyping to support decision-making and urban transformation. Projects have ranged from co-created social infrastructure in Colombian cities, to agent-based digital twins for planning in Sarajevo (Digital Twin - Urban Transformation Project Sarajevo ETHZ UTPS, 2023), to digital tools for upgrading unplanned settlements in Kigali (Walczak et al., 2025). Across these contexts, the focus has been on collaboration, open access, and embedded processes that link academia, institutions, and communities in transformation efforts.

This work is being developed in relatively structured environments, where governance systems, institutional continuity, and access to resources created conditions for implementation despite the local challenges. While these contexts enabled the development of new tools and approaches, they also raise an important question: Can such practices operate in overlooked and decentered territories

marked by limited governance, scarce resources, and ongoing instability? Or do these settings require entirely different ways of working, grounded in other logics, relations, and situated forms of practice?

The research is based at The University of Applied Arts in Vienna and developed in collaboration with the Chair of Architecture and Urban Design of Professor Hubert Klumpner at ETH Zurich. It is grounded in Colombia, where I have worked for several years with state institutions and universities in major cities through the Urban Transformation Program Colombia (UTPC), and where I founded Re-Tornar al Hogar, a collaborative research and housing project co-developed with displaced and returnee communities in the municipality of San Francisco, Antioquia (Jaramillo Quintero, 2024).

This long-term engagement provides not only a concrete site for developing and testing design-led approaches, but also a grounded platform from which to reimagine the role of architects and spatial practitioners in supporting opportunities for more prosperous and dignified futures in territories shaped by uncertainty and possibility.

Research Question

How can spatial and design practices help create new opportunities that lead to prosperous futures and support dignified lives in historically overlooked territories?

This question guides the research toward developing situated strategies that respond to the political, ecological, and cultural conditions of territorial transformation. It challenges the limitations of dominant planning tools and explores how spatial practice can operate through alternative methods and alliances. Grounded in the Colombian context and informed by broader Latin American dynamics, the project advances design as a mode of embedded engagement, capable of working within complexity and co-producing spatial responses with local actors.

Methodology

This research develops a flexible and context-sensitive methodology grounded in three interrelated frameworks: Action Research, Pluriversal Methodologies, and Assemblage Ethnography. Together, they support iterative engagement with territories shaped by displacement, ecological fragility, and fragmented governance. Rather than applying fixed models, the research co-produces spatial tools such as participatory mapping, scenario building, and design prototyping through embedded collaboration with local actors.

These methods will be tested through fieldwork in the Oriente Antioqueño region, where overlapping urban and rural, formal and informal, and ecological and extractive dynamics demand adaptive responses. In parallel, teaching platforms at ETH Zurich and the University of Applied Arts Vienna will serve as sites for methodological experimentation and dissemination, extending the research beyond its immediate context.

Workplan and Activities

The project begins in March 2025 with a focus on grounding the research through critical reading, early field engagement, and the development of a situated methodology that combines Action Research, Pluriversal Methodologies, and Assemblage Ethnography. Throughout the first year, the research will contribute to Phase 2.0 of the Urban Transformation Program Colombia (UTPC) in Medellín and be presented in key academic settings. Year two centers on applied fieldwork in Oriente Antioqueño, where participatory mapping, scenario-building, and design prototyping will be tested alongside teaching-based experimentation at ETH Zurich and the University of Applied Arts Vienna. The final year consolidates these insights into a coherent territorial method, producing both a dissertation and complementary outputs such as manuals, exhibitions, and visual documentation. Across all phases, the project aims to generate tools and frameworks for collaborative, design-led territorial transformation in post-conflict and resource-scarce contexts.

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