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## Optimal Mediators:

### Interview with Prof. Kees Christiaanse

There are few people who've had as broad an influence on urban design as Kees Christiaanse. He leads the ETH Zurich Chair of Urban Design and Planning and his firm KCAP, based in Rotterdam, Zurich and Shanghai. Through his chair at ETH, he is a collaborator with Schindler Group for the Schindler Global Award student urban design competition. Over the years he has educated, through academia or practice, many people involved in the spatial design of cities and has served as an expert consultant. Central to his practice is the belief that urban design – and urban designers – have a primary role as mediators in complex urban projects.

As the Schindler Global Award begins its 2017 award cycle, journalist and consultant Jessica Bridger sat with Kees Christiaanse to find out why urban design might be the optimal mediator in facing global challenges, the importance of mobility in our present and future cities and the best way for students (and their faculty) to get involved in the Schindler Global Award 2017.

#### **Schindler Global Award (SGA): Why is it important for students to involve themselves in the Schindler Global Award?**

Kees Christiaanse (KC): It is very fruitful for students to directly involve themselves in the challenges of global urbanization through participation in the Schindler Global Award. The most important virtue of the competition is that it potentially serves as a platform for the exchange of ideas. Participating students will be confronted with work from other universities, so it acts almost as a benchmarking measure for their own work, and therefore also their school.

**SGA: Does participating in the competition help to prepare students for later, for professional life?**

KC: The way that we've defined the competition helps students to get insight into the largest problems inherent to urbanization, for example, those of mobility and inequality, pollution and environment. I think that the consideration of these problems as direct inputs to urban design schemes will become increasingly important. Therefore including these elements and approaches to them, evidence of thinking about them, will be an asset in their portfolio when the students later apply for jobs. Beyond that it is good for students to work on a level of global exchange, given that practice and academia more and more often work in a worldwide context.

**SGA: Each student team is asked to have a faculty member oversee their work – how might the process of the SGA benefit the professor or instructor?**

KC: There's a clear pattern of participation in which the professors who take part have a certain affinity for each other. They potentially form a global network of sustainable urban design chairs/faculties, which could evolve into something more intense in the future.

**SGA: Turning to the 2017 competition, what do you find most appealing about engaging as an urban designer in Brazil?**

KC: Brazil is interesting because it has an intermediate position between all kinds of global conditions. It is not fully developed, but it is also not considered what we used to call a "third world" country; it is somewhere in between. It also has high level of diversity, resulting in intercultural exposure and exchange. It has a very exciting tropical urban culture, architectural condition and history. There's a lot of potential for future urbanistic strategies there, building on significant heritage and traditions. On the other hand there are enormous problems, such as slums and pollution. Perhaps this is overstating it a little bit, but it is clearly one of the countries where the world would be saved – or not.

**SGA: What's particularly compelling about our site this year, considering the changeover from an area dominated by a wholesale marketplace and logistics to a more holistic neighborhood?**

KC: This is a typical urban transformation site, linked to current and former logistics infrastructure with river, highway and rail meeting in the inner city. The infrastructure nexus means that the site is potentially an important interface area for mobility and accessibility in the city. This gives the site a particular *genius loci*, a strong identity. The change in neighborhood function frees an enormous surface area in the center of the city, which can be treated as a 'reservation zone' for all kinds of dense, layered urban functions. This also suggests that it is quite delicate: you have to be careful about how you intervene there because if you spoil it, you spoil a lot.

**SGA: How can students integrate a large change into the existing city fabric, in a way that is respectful of what the area is or could be?**

KC: They must first inventory what is there, somewhat like a treasure map in which positive qualities are identified so they can be preserved and brought into line with the new scheme. Secondly, the assignment is to create an overarching access and public space framework to structure the area, embedding a high degree of connectivity. Connectivity points are important – they help create and maintain community. Last, but not least, students should think about the potential mix of future uses and building typologies in relation to the focuses of functionality and connectivity in the surrounding region.

**SGA: What role does mobility play in this?**

KC: Mobility is one of the prime drivers of urbanization, and this includes vertical mobility. Because the world and the economy are global, and global growth happens by access, when we are able to transfer knowledge, goods, activity, people, and so on. Mobility is the most important component of a city. If an element lacks a mobility connection it does not function well as part of the city, nor is it tied to the world, integrated in the economy.

**SGA: Students of urban design or architecture might not think that mobility is their primary concern, that it is in the domain of a transportation planner or engineer – what can urban design add, how can it make better mobility systems, better connections between public space and transit?**

KC: Mobility and public space are essentially and necessarily connected. You move from your neighborhood to other neighborhoods in the city through public space, and at a smaller scale, into your home or office and so on. The way public space works is as an accessibility instrument to all urban functions, and as an interface between static functions and transport functions. Urban design consists of a very high quality public space system, integrated with mobility and static uses. The high quality urban design of public spaces can strongly enhance the social and environmental sustainability – and stability – of urban regions.

**SGA: What might be some of the new modes of urban design, how might it integrate with other fields and disciplines – instead of seeing developers or politicians as combatants, or those interested in pursuing other interests, how can we form partnerships and alliances to move forward?**

KC: I always say that if you're an urban designer, compared with an architect, you are the coordinator of everybody's bad taste. One of the most important tasks of an urban designer is to plan the procedural aspects of the urban design process, in particular this means putting stakeholders into place. I'd say it is even a political activity. If you don't do this, the design goes nowhere. Apart from that, an urban designer must think beyond himself or herself, beyond certain limited timelines, because the most important thing inherent to urban design is to establish a long-term urban framework that can accommodate all kinds of physical, economical and political changes. Urban design in

complex situations, if it is successful, most often leads to a procedure that takes a very long time. The designer himself or herself will most often not live to see all the changes wrought by their project. He or she must make their proposal so self-evident that it is eventually taken over by those entrusted with the heritage of urban spaces. This is extremely interesting, extremely complicated and very different from architecture, in which someone gets a commission for something that will be built in three years.

I believe we don't make a plan; we make a new status quo. We step into an existing situation and attempt to steer things in a certain direction, alter the pace of change in an area. In that sense the observation of what is there is of primary importance to thinking.

**SGA: When we think of stakeholders and participation we've seen a lot about the bottom up side of things, but what's the value in speaking with developers?**

KC: There's a misunderstanding of bottom up and top down, which is the result of politics, which itself tends to go completely left or completely right. There's a difficulty to find the center. If you look at urban development in the 1970s and 1980s everyone believed in the free market, in bottom-up development. Fifteen years later everyone then thought, no, it must be top down. But the secret is that it lies in the middle. We should work in a way in which politicians can make use of their righteous mandate by virtue of their election by voters, but also with some mechanism of participation for the bottom-up forces. This should be put into a complimentary organization instead of an antagonistic one.

**SGA: How could there be a better balance?**

KC: In my experience it is most successful when an urban designer is the lead in organizing the procedure, as a conductor or director; when he or she is embedded in the entire process, and understands the role and weight of all stakeholders involved. Most often a city administration, an external advisor or a neighborhood committee organizes these procedures. There is usually too much concern for the issues that stem from the one group of people organizing. I think that we, as urban designers, can handle this better, achieving a balanced approach. We are the optimal mediators between politics, market parties, consultants and the population.

**SGA: How best can people collect knowledge to engage in a competition like the SGA?**

KC: It is best if students receive support from their institutions to visit the site, if possible. But if not, we provide a comprehensive information/data set, sufficient to engage with the site in response to the competition brief. It is important for students to look at comparable projects in the vicinity, where people are living, to get a clue about how these projects can be done.

**SGA: How can one get a sense of place for a city that one has not visited, how should students conduct their research?**

KC: It would be good for students to select a main theme within the spectrum of components that are part of an urban design project. If they were to focus on a completely integrated project, it might be beyond the level of their status as students. I think the students should define a focus, with the guidance of their overseeing faculty, distilled from the brief. This will help them to focus and gather information.

**SGA: How much should this be a dream of something possible 50 years down the road, and how much should it be something where they try to be conservative?**

KC: It is an ideas competition – this means the students can go out of their minds if they choose to do so. Any position can be chosen, from extreme pragmatism to the utopian. That's the virtue of an ideas competition.

**SGA: I suppose we'll hopefully get some pragmatic utopians?**

KC: Sure, that would be good.