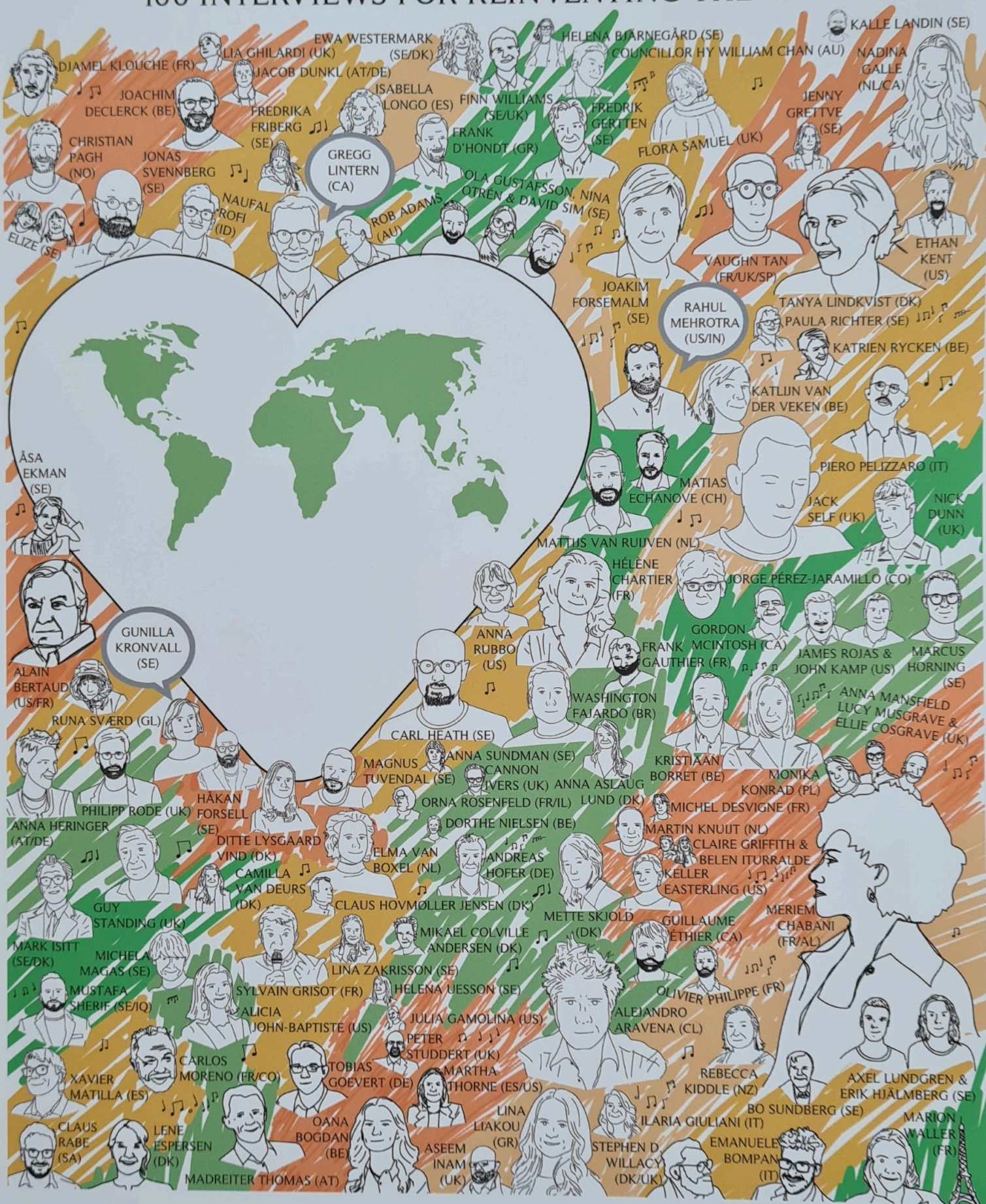




KEYNOTE CONVERSATIONS

100 INTERVIEWS FOR REINVENTING THE CITY



84. Local Dynamics and Creative Tension



Matias Echanove

Co-creator of the urbz collective living and working in between Mumbai, India, and Geneva, Switzerland, 2023

Matias Echanove, based in Geneva and Mumbai, calls himself an urbanologist, interested in how people shape their habitats and how we may support this process. I invited him to share his thoughts on envisioning a more incremental future of our urbanism. In response to my questions, he writes:

"I believe that form follows process. This means that urban interventions must respect the local dynamics at work in the production of places rather than imposing preconceived notions of spatial order."

"Picture a busy narrow street – people walking up and down; motorbikes and utility vehicles honking; electric wires and fibre lanes hanging from one side to the other, sometimes entangled to the point to that it is faster to lay a new line rather than sorting existing ones. On both sides of the street a mix of housing, shops, tea stalls, temples, tuition centres, workshops, clinics, etc."

"These functions are not next to each other, but piled up on top of each other. Sometimes two structures are merged together to accommodate a larger space – maybe a textile workshop, a space of worship, or a banquet hall. At the street level, political posters rival shop signs, some of which are hand drawn, others that are heavily photo-shopped with colours saturated enough to stand out in this buoyant ensemble."

"People everywhere, kids in school uniforms, construction workers carrying a pipe, men and women on their way to work wearing well-ironed shirts and bright sarees, a fish vendor with a basket on her head with the catch of the day, or three ladies chatting with a fourth person selling spices on some steps."

"Such a street could be in Dhavari, Mumbai (where our office is located) or in a thousand other places. There are more functions being fulfilled in this street than could

ever be put into a plan. Intervening in such a context demands the same care as preservation in a historic medieval European quarter."

"The elements that compose the complexity of any urban ensemble must be considered as the starting point for any urban improvement project. The project must recognise and build upon existing dynamics. Relationships, uses, meanings and sometimes aesthetic considerations must guide any kind of intervention. Careless intervention could mean reducing the vitality of this street to a handful of functions. This is why, at the urban scale, form must follow process, not function."

"In this process conflict is a fundamentally social act. We should not think of conflict as the negation of social relationships. Conflict can be a response to injustice or indifference. It is through social conflict that oppressed populations obtain recognition and rights. They fight to exist in society."

"Most of the time, conflict can be seen as the desire to change the status quo, to reset the parameters of a relationship. It can be understood as an expression of diverging interests and a claim to coexistence. Likewise, we build solid relationships with each other not by suppressing our differences, but by allowing their expression and accepting it."

"This is why in my work, in the field of participatory urban planning, what matters most is not to reach a compromise between all the parties with a stake in the project. My job is to make sure that all parties, the loud ones as well as the silent ones, can express their views, especially when they contradict each other. I call these points of disagreement creative tension points. Mapping them out provides the most solid structure for an urban project. The identification of tension points is the first step towards their creative resolution."

Written by Matias Echanove, Co-founder of Urbz, a global action and research collective. 9 Nov 2023

"AT THE URBAN SCALE,
FORM MUST FOLLOW PROCESS,
NOT FUNCTION."

Matias Echanove



SYNTHESIS

- Mess is More: there is always more to the urban than meets the eye.
- Prioritise relationships, capacity, and meanings over functions.
- Embrace Creative Tension in Planning.