

# Bricolage at Community Forge

## *Urban Collaboratory Studio: Participatory design for an experimental performance space*

***“Worldmaking as we know it always starts from  
worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.”***

— Nelson Goodman



### ***Background and Project***

In the spring'21 the Urban Collaboratory Studio will work with Community Forge and Bricolage Theater on the participatory design of a black box performance space. Community Forge is a grassroots initiative transforming Wilkinsburg's former vacant Johnston Elementary school into a community center. It is committed to youth empowerment, community collaboration, organizational incubation and neighborhood wellbeing. Pre-Covid, the studio already partnered with Community Forge on developing a vision for its former school yard and realizing a first phase—the project was recognized by an ULI Placemaking Award and a ACSA Collaborative Practice Award. Now, Bricolage Theater is relocating from its downtown location to Community Forge. The company's mission is to immerse artists and audiences in adventurous theatrical experiences that foster connections and alter perceptions. The name Bricolage refers to the environmental philosophy of Claude Levi Strauss of making innovative use of “whatever is at hand” to create something new. Colin Rowe famously drew on Strauss' concept, advocating for an architectural practice that would balance the role of the engineer and the bricoleur. Today, faced with the daunting task of imagining other possible worlds built of a broken planet, the notion of the architect-bricoleur seems more pertinent than ever. In the same spirit the studio will develop design tactics for adapting and reusing the school's former library and gym into an experimental performance space.



### ***Urban Acupuncture and Participatory Action Research (PAR)***

In a participatory design process the studio will support Community Forge with developing ideas for a multifunctional performance space and translate these into a coherent design. We will then identify a strategic design-build component that promises to act as catalyst in the incremental transformation of the space. Within only 14 weeks, the studio offers an opportunity to see a small project through from conception to prototyping and combine conceptual thinking with very concrete and hands-on action—or urban acupuncture. Methodologically, the studio draws inspiration from Participatory Action Research (PAR), in which reflection and action feed on one another, aiming at understanding the world in order to change it. PAR grounds the production of knowledge in real community needs and learning. Thus, the studio is just as much about designing a community engagement process, as it is about designing and realizing a full scale intervention

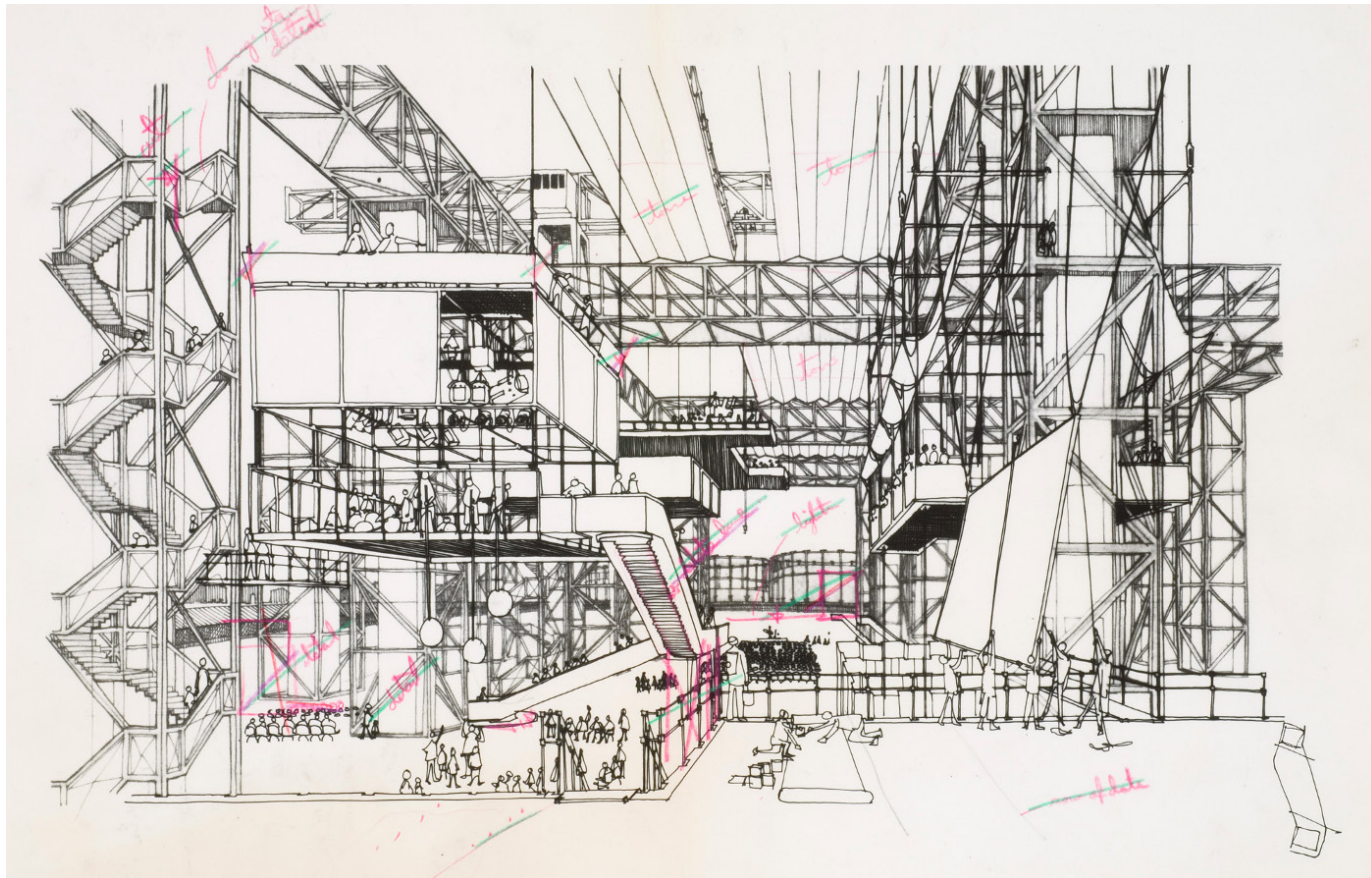


*Photos of community engagement sessions and co-design workshops for the playscape at Community Forge, Wilkinsburg, 2019.*

### ***Learning Objectives***

Engaging in a genuinely open-ended and inductive process, in this studio you will learn to work with uncertainties and understand the definition of program, site, desires and needs of future users as an essential part of the design process. Working with real clients, as well as real hopes and concerns comes with responsibilities and constraints that can be challenging. Students will collaborate with diverse community members and stakeholders as co-designers, as well as in changing team constellations within the studio. In this regard the studio will shift the notion of singular authorship. Accordingly, the studio

requires flexibility and the ability to take on different roles and responsibilities, the willingness to communicate and listen to a diverse audience, as well as engage in material fabrication and physical construction work. The studio will regularly meet at Community Forge in Wilkinsburg, as well as use CMU's woodshop and DFabLab. This studio will expand your notion of spatial production beyond the mere design of buildings to the design of situations and events, embracing temporality and performativity as essential dimensions in architecture.



Perspective drawing of Cedric Price's "Fun Palace"  
Source: University of Brighton. 2014.

### World Making and Immersive Theater

Across time and cultures, theater has been a powerful medium for imagining other possible worlds. Immersive theater, as practiced by Bricolage Theater, challenges the traditional audience-performance relationship by breaking the fourth wall and blurring the boundaries between looking and doing, script and improvisation, the roles of specialist and amateur, student and teacher. Instead of sitting in a seat watching a story unfold on a stage, the audience is moving through an interactive environment, engaging in the story as an agent of change. If theater is able to blur these boundaries, can the same tactics be deployed for transforming the real world? Drawing inspiration from what Jacques Ranciere described as the emancipated spectator, we will question role distributions, power relations and authorship in participatory design? Building on the vision of the Fun Palace by architect Cedric Price and theater director Joan Littlewood, we will explore what role immersive theater can play in the radical imagining of other possible worlds, and how architecture can encourage the transgression of the real and the fictional, probable, possible and preferable.



Top to bottom left:  
Experimental performance spaces:  
Kitchen Monument, Raumlabor, Duisburg, 2006.  
Play House, Power House Productions, Detroit, 2014.  
The Cineroleum, Assemble, London, 2010.

Top to bottom right:  
Immersive theater performance by Bricolage  
Production Company  
STRATA, 2012.  
OjO-The Next Generation of Travel, 2013.  
Project Amelia - Take Control, 2019.

