Jane Hall [Assemble]

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How did Assemble begin and what was your main motivations to create it?

Jane Hall - Assemble is a group of 20 people and we begun because most of us studied architecture together at Cambridge University. We felt the necessity of working together and doing projects, and for that we had to bring skills from other places, so the group grew through contacting people who could help us. The ideia was to have a more hand experience with the processes of building and making, which is a kind of antithesis of working in an office.

In the UK architecture education is really fragmented so you do it in different parts, we only had part one that is only 3 years, then you go to an office and we were all engaged in offices in that time. We kept meeting up in a pub and someone were always moaning and complaining about our day-to-day life, about how boring it was to work in an office. We were quite aware of it and we kind of felt in limbo, you know? You're young and just don't know what you're doing, you feel that things are moving fast and there is a desperation.

How old were you?

Jane - I was 22, an year or 2 older than most people. That's also the thing, I feel that young people, young architects are untacked from resources, you have literally no fear. And it was 20 of you, all friends, all trusted each other. Someone was like "Yeah, let's do it!" and the others go "Yeah, yeah, ok!". And then you think "What am I doing?", and then "I don't know what I'm doing either".

So we started an imaginary thing, we meet in the pub, we discuss the ideal project, what would it be, get the site and make something together, we would design something, we would build it, open to the public and see how it was like. So we did the Cineroleum, the cinema in the petrol station. That was about looking at disused space, looking at what was happening in London during the recession when there were lots of places going out of business, lot of empty sites. But the beginning of Assemble wasn't theoretical, it was really selfish: we wanted to build. I wanted to learn how to use a drill! And that sheer joy of making, making with your friends and helping them solving things in a practical way. We just started doing that.

Was there anyone leading? Anyone that knew more than others who could teach how to make things?

Jane - Architectural design is made of different skills, and the driving force were the few people that were going out and phoning the

developer, finding who owned the site and asking “Can we borrow your site?”. I wasn’t involved in that, but seeing my friends doing it, I was suddenly phoning up companies of different materials and asking to borrow stuff. And some people really took on the idea of showning film, looking for the licenses, producing the bar and the food. And it worked, I don’t know how but everyone found a niche.

We’d meet up weekly to discuss a program, we’d start doing drawings and sections. We would just hang out together and do a day of buildings chairs, divide in groups all making chairs and see how that looked like and say “This is a much better chair, let’s go with your chair!”. The whole thing was designed through testing and making. Building something in front of you is so much quicker.

And those skilled people you invited to the group were older people?

Jane - No, they were our age or even younger. I didn’t realize that Louie - that did all the electrical stuff and was really on the construction site -, is 3 or 4 years younger than me. And I took like 2 years to learn that. We have different backgrounds but we are all in our late 20’s now, which is a problem: we all have the same issues and it is all gonna happen in the same time.

It's easy for architects to speak in jargons or overemphasize an issue. Someone who hasn’t been condioned in architecture education puts you in a perspective. So the few people with different backgrounds were sobering Assemble. Like “What are you talking about? That’s bulshit!”.

Does each member have an specific skill or an specific hole in the group? What has been yours?

Jane - That’s a good question. I always talk of Assemble as a plataform, so the whole idea of the collective is that we support the other to enable each one to do what we as individuals want to do. I find a lot of misconception about collectives or about our one, as if we had a shared ethos. Assemble is more a supportive network of helping people with what they want to do, as opposed to having a vision or shared manifesto. Actualy the whole project is to support each other and basicaly work out what we are interested in, because you don’t get a lot of space in university to experiment freely with no pressure.

Everybody has their own individual interest and is starting to do different types of projects. I am more interested in temporary exhibition and things that crossover art, sculpture and research. And there are people who are completly like “That is bulshit, I wanna build a building!”. I completly respect them for wanting to do that and I will give them my feedback about what they do, just as I respect their feedback about what I’m doing.

And how do Assemble manage to have a collective identity being such a diverse group?

Jane - This is the weird thing, everybody says that there is an “Assemble aesthetic” and I always think that’s really embarassing because I don’t knwow how it looks like, but then I can see it. All of us have the same design background, the same teachers, the same references and we get on so well with people. I keep forgetting that everyday I go to work with my best friends and sometimes I have to

remember to go out for a drink with them and not just seat next to typing. When you work together everyday for five years you develop a shared vocabulary so end up generating a similar aesthetics, but it's not conscious.

If we were broke away, I think each one would develop a very different way of being. I always think that it wouldn't be a failure if Assemble suddenly ended because it has always been a vehicle for us to work out who we are. And in your 20's you don't get much base to privilege and seat back to think about who you are. So we try to create that space.

Do you have a basic file or some rules for Assemble's presentations, for example?

Jane - No. We work in a shared plataform where we have a folder for the presentations which is "talks", so it's crazy to look through it. There is Gilles that uses pink a lot, and other guy that do these weird diagrams. One of the really great things of Assemble is that we've got all that invitations to come and talk about our work, which means we get to travel a lot. Now we are trying to think about presentations much more instead of just present projects chronologicaly. But anyway it's kind of wild, and I really like that people are free to represent Assemble. Sometimes when we're being interviewed I think "What are you talking about? That's bulshit!" and we start argueing.

You are not worried and not trying to control an image of Assemble.

Jane - It changes so fast. At first it was like a hobby and we did it for fun, and then it seemed that what we're doing was really new in London and people were really inspired and talking about it. The more we've done, the more we realized we had a voice and what kind of opposition we do, what our agency is. Talking to people is a really good way to reflect on what we're doing.

Could you define what do you mean by agency in architecture and in Assemble's practice?

Jane - Agency means the ability of the architect to direct and change a project according to their own ideas and constraints rather than those placed upon them.

Nowadays in Brazil the architectural process is radically divided between project made by architects, construction made by engeneering companies, and programme is managed by the client after space is ready. Assemble embraces the whole process, where did this desire come from?

Jane - We, as a group, have always reconized that architecture isn't necessarily about design. But it became naturally, we're just too nosy, too involved, there are a few projects we can't let go. So we've set up companies for three projects now. Blackhorse is a workshop space. We are in the board of directors, we do their business plan, we set up a real company that runs the place. We did the design but most of the project was to think a way that Blackhorse exists without us.

There is also the Adventure Playground in Glasgow that is a company that we direct, we employ the playworkers and work out the business structure to keep the playground. And now Grandy Workshop is a social enterprise, with a business strategy and plan.

We found out that if you want to have more control of how a project will work, as opposed to be the victim of other forces, you have to be involved in its management and business side. And to that means that you are that earlier on in the process and also you are there after, it's ongoing forever.

Is that a kind of Assemble's ethos, something that you've decided to do: being there in the whole process?

Jane - I don't think that we wanted to run that too many companies, but that probably comes from the fact that we all get really involved with things. We have realized that as an architect the design will be only a small proportion of a project, so it's good if you can enjoy and have a say in all those little bits that you're going to have to do anyway.

We were self-initiating so much work, so we had a voice of what was happening in cities, and maybe a new approach to designing in a public sphere, so pleople start to listen to you. And they come to you with projects saying they don't know what they want and what to do. So you suddenly realize that you have an agency to design a brief and set a term of it and then place yourself in that whether it is the design or the management. So it has been the way we have found ourselves working, we are more confortable with that. We are massively based on relationships and friendships, often things start with a conversation and we find ourselves in a position that accidentaly start a project.

People try to look and see what's radical about what we do, and sometimes our projects are really boring, they're just buildings. We do these surveys within our group with a few questions like "What types of projects do you think Assemble should be doing?", and 80% of people in our group say they want to do buildings, what is very traditional, which is weird. And so some of our projects are just normal, they have a client.

We are doing really exciting projects and everyone is able to do things they're interested in, but it would be really cool to go back to the beginning and do a self-initiated thing. We have a lot more resources now, we would be in a better position to self-fund, but it's about finding time. So we kind of have gone a bit too far in one direction and I worry we have institutionalized ourselves and in order to keep going we have maybe become too bureaucratic, we have too many rules. But we're quite good in reflecting on that.

So what you miss from Assemble's beginning is freedom?

Jane - Anarchy, complete chaos. Assemble's beggining was actually anarchy: self-management. Sure there were mistakes, but basicaly the whole thing happened and ended up quite well.

And how does your practice work now?

Jane - So the way Assemble works is: every friday an e-mail is sent around everyone in the office that lists clearly what projects have been offered, what talks, what events, what trips. Each one has

to reply saying what they're interested in and then there are 2 people in Assemble that are dedicated to administer that and they would allocate you to work. Usualy we end up with 2 people in every project and these 2 people are entirely responsible for how that project is managed. So in our monday morning meeting they would have to show the fee proposal to the group and explain how much money there will be for construction, for design, how the project will be sustainable and carried out. It means that every single project is independently financially stable, no project would subsidize another project. We must proove it will be launchable. And we always question why are we doing it, what's interesting about it. But most of it is about transparency, about knowing what's happening.

I think that people are very curious about how Assemble works. Yesterday after your talk a few people asked me "How do they make money?".

Jane - People assume that we don't make money. You would never go to an architect and ask "How do you pay your staff?". Actualy Assemble works like an architecture office, we make money, every project has to make money.

Maybe architects don't understand it because you have such a different profile. Sometimes it looks more similar to a cultural production than to an architecture office.

Jane - Yes, and people assume that it's gonna be easy.

What are your tacticts to reclaim public space?

Jane - The Cineroleum and the Folly were our first 2 projects that were really public. And there was New Addington Square that was about seeing all the activities that were happening behind closed doors and making them happen in public as a way to make the community reflect on the fact that there was a community in this place which local government said was empty and destroyed. We were saying "Actualy there are lots of stuff happening and we just need to show it. I thought that was really interesting. And in Liverpool the fact that the residents went out and painted the houses and planted the streets. Small acts of resistance through being physicaly present is the best way to create ownership in public space, create a program for public space and also a design for a more permanent future for public space. So I feel like a lot of stuff we're interested in is more how it's used and occupied as opposed to what end up looking like.

It seems you always have a sense of care with local communities where you work in, trying to empower them, improving local economy and professional skills. How do you make these bonds with the site and the community in order to have a collaborative practice?

Jane - It completly depends. In the beggining most of our projects were based on the public ground, so we had this social agenda. I think most young architects are really concerned about this, and it's something we are interested in but it's not the only thing. So some projects have no social agenda, no community, like the Brutalist Playground: it's pure art. And there are ones that are more

explicitly community based like the one in Glasgow that it's in such a sensitive area to be working in, or the projects in Liverpool, with the existing communities that struggled for years. Basicaly what happens is that someone from Assemble ends up living there. We now have 2 people who actualy moved to live in Liverpool, and 3 other people who commute that. So, we've got 5 members, 30% of the studio, in Liverpool at least half of the week. It just happened. It's a lot about friendnship, asking questions, being phisicaly present.

Do you have a methodology to do the research?

Jane - Not really. I feel that architects looked to find a formal way to talk about social approach, but there is something about human nature in that and it is actualy just what you tap into do. You go to a strange place, you wanna know more about it, you just talk to people and want to know how it is. Kind of how I've met you guys, an ongoing process, chating both about what we're interested in and wanting to know each other.

That is maybe a huge difference from you guys from average archictecture offices: their research is often more technical, they go there, study the site and take pictures, but rarely go deeper in human relations.

Jane - And I think that the projects that we've done much more it's been in really extreme conditions. So Glasgow and Liverpool are really politicaly and socially vulnerable places and the idea of community is just so interesting and so fascinating. You want to talk to people about what is happening. And there are some other projects where you have to create your own community. Blackhorse Workshop, for example, is in this part of East London where is very residencial and we didn't even knew anybody there. But because we knew that it was something that people would be interested in, now community has grown around the project. So now they are much involved and they come every week to use the workshop and the cafe. We didn't know the community untill we started but that first moment of doing the project instigated bringing people together. So now we have more work, there is more design to be done and we have a community to talk to.

When you set up those companies, they run like a business itself? Do you employ people from outside Assemble to run it?

Jane - Yes, it is a bussiness with its own office. There are different types of companies. For Blackhorse we employed Harriot who is the manager and her day-to-day job is to deal whith the business side, making sure that the workshop has fundings and can stay opened. And we employed the technichians who are skilled makers who help people to fabricate things in the workshops. All those 3 people are external to Assemble but we did the interviews, we helped to choose them.

Do you always think about these companies in a way they are able to produce an income and to be self-sustainable?

Jane - Profit is not really a thing yet, but self-sustainability yes. Making sure there is a strong business plan. We were not that

involved with the management in the Playground in Glasgow and there were some bad problems. It's a real struggle so we had to step in again, go back and interfere. We are always there.

Are you guys who do the business plans?

Jane - Yes. In Granby Workshop the business plan for all the products was presented to the group by Fran and Louis who were living in Liverpool. We shared sheets, we discussed the products, why to choose some and not others, which were more profitable. We discussed what would be a good direction for the workshop, how it could be managed. We review from times to times the design but we also review the business plan as if it was a design.

Do you also have an expert doing business plans?

Jane - Yes, we have a countant. And one of Assemble's architect has taken the legal side of our practice. So he does the documents that we now stand out to clients saying what are our terms.

In your speech yesterday, you said that the Folly for a Flyover project is more about the space to gather people than about the building itself. Do you think that architecture can be materialized as a social event, and only, or does it need a physical transformation?

Jane - This is really interesting about temporary structures: the Folly was there for only few weeks, in fact existing. We didn't get the money that we needed to make it permanent, but now it is not considered as a dangerous place anymore, as it was. People are skating there, are using that space and that wouldn't happen if we hadn't done it.

I think there is a lot of power in fiction and mithology, in storytelling and how space can be reimagined through quite simple moves, not necessarly about what's built, but about what happens. So the structure was just a symbolic way of enlivening imagination. This little house under the road. The Folly itself wasn't that well made, it wasn't that original, it wasn't that great, it was just like a little pitch building. Most people actualy didn't spent a lot of time inside the structure, they were all outside. We needed something physical in order to give the space a sense of importance. I think there are loads of value in making something.

To structure the space.

Jane - And to give people an image. Because there is this thing between professional and amateur knowlodge, and us as architects being able to envisage something. People can engage quite easily, they don't need these big fancy things, they just need something and a bit of investiment in what's happening. It's a lot about showing people that you care, that someone cares. So actualy it was the space in front of the Folly that became activated and used, the sucessful bit, but that would never had happened without a building. It's that symbiotic.

And the Glasgow Workshop is not about a building.

Jane - That’s the other side of it. Glasgow is a really sensitive area. It has been completly abandonned by local authorities, by politics, by everybody. It didn’t matter if it was anything physical to show for it, but it was important that it was someone regularly there doing something, and making sure people could use the site and play on it. I think that both is just working out what you do want and what’s right for the site. That’s what is really interesting about fiction and temporary imagination: built enviroment doesn’t have to be something that take ages to do, flexibility and change are really important.

Do you think that fiction is a way to change a tough reality?

Jane - Yes, I think that it’s about making the correct history. It’s so much about perception, like fear of something happening. In Southbank Center in London we have the Hayward Gallery and there are skateboarders underneath and everyone wants to move the skateboarders. It’s an accidental space and they colonized it because it happened to be really good for skateboarding. They have been there for 20 or 30 years and now people want to move them on. In the future maybe it is easy to say that skateboarding is really antisocial, so it is very important that everyone remembers its history.

Would you say that by embracing architecture as a social act and transforming a place with many hands, making becomes a kind of collective ritual?

Jane - I think that making is a really democratic tool. Everybody, everyday, experiences everthing in a 1 to 1 scale. So if you build something as closed to the scale as it is gonna be, it’s a so much easier and quicker tool to talk to someone about, whether they like, whether they think it’s gonna work, whether it’s a realistic detail.

Drawing something in 2d or 3d, or making a model, is always a miniature, it’s always an abstraction of reality. It depends on who you are talking to, if they are architects you can have that conversation, but if you’re talking to a parent or a friend it is quite easy to understand how abstract that world can be.

Architects consider themselves too much and rely on these skills they develop, they can read a plan, they can make 3ds and understand proportions. Building in 1 to 1 scale it’s like humbling because you are just interacting with it in the same way that everyone else. One thing that everyone does understand is materials and scale.

The drawing can be a tool of division between specialized and non-specialized people. There is someone in control of the plan and the others, the workers, that just do what they’re told to do.

Jane - In the Folly we had the drawings of how the scafoldings should be put up, but the scafolders have their own way of doing it. They were all smoking weed, they rolled up our drawings and put them in a scafolding hole. So I was in the site and there was that stoned guy trying to remember where did he put our drawings. I was there just thinking “That is not really how I’d thought I’d communicate”. I thought the drawing would be our way of comunicating, but in the

absence of a drawing you just have to work out human to human, and he knows how scafoldings are put together and I don't know how scafoldings are out together. And my drawing was not gonna help.

It dependes on who you are working with, but often is about just trusting the maker. People dedicate their lives to become really skilled. And you just say that in the end it needs to look like this, I don't care how you make it, just make it look like this. You trust and just whatch while they're doing it.

So what we do in Sugarhouse, our studio, is to have all those people really closed together. When we started, when we did the Folly, the Cineroleum, it was all about us trying to learn how to make. And what you realize quite quickly is that there is people doing this for years and may know how to make, and you don't have to make everything. But if you have these people really closed to you, you can both ask them for help or make stuff yourself. So we always go to the carpenters who are running their own independet company in Sugarhouse. We'll show them the drawings, they will make something up for us, we will talk to them, because they are next door, it takes 2 minutes to speed something up. It's much more efficient and it's much more fun to see it happening! It's really exciting.

Your process is very experimental by making yourselves the materials and sometimes developing your own techniques. How do you work in a big project like the Goldsmiths Art Gallery when it's not possible that it will be you actually making it?

Jane - Even a project in the scale of the Goldsmiths has real economic constraints. So the façade is going to be make out in a kind of cement board that we have been building 1 to 1 scale, staining the cement board in different colors, and different oils, and different finishes, as a way of maybe suggest to a fabricator what we may want to achieve or what is possible. So in every single project there is something that is made. There is definitely an engagement with material, whatever the project is. And we usualy use something that is quite unusual. I think it's because we're quite interested in industrial processes and the beauty of process. Like the reconstituted foam: no one designed the foam to look as cool as it looks. But the process by which is made generates that and so we try to draw attention to it. Or, we just enjoy working with things that are maybe made out of purpose. That have a complete function but have by accident created something really beautiful. We like to celebrate that.

Why hands on experience is a need for Assemble?

Jane - I think that's probably a background thing that we're really interested in and we really love. We get so much joy from seeing materials transformed. We have a kiln in our studios, so everyone in Assemble is making really weird ceramic objetcs. We are really fascinated by the process of transformation and I feel that there is a lot of potential from very cheap and simple things to be transformed in really beautiful and extraordinary things. And you don't need to invest a lot of money in expensive stuff. Sometimes that feels weirdly not satisfying, it's so much satisfaction seeing something come to life through a process. And it is about learning that process and applying in the design.

All of the products of Granby Workshops were about process and seeing the final products, about how it's made and seeing the hand of the maker. We got a project of a school of art in the underground and we are working with the ceramic tiles and one guy in Assemble has been doing all these crazy tests and I've spent 2 hours with him just pouring all the different samples he made. We just get very exited of the potentialities. I think you can push your ideas forever if you understand what the material can be.

By using low-tech solutions, it seems that you want to show that it is economically possible for all of us. Is that related to an idea of sustainability?

Jane - I suppose it depends on what the interpretation on sustainability is. In some of our projects we found out that reusing materials can be sometimes less environmentally friendly than new materials. So we did a project about designing Robin's day and we made these huge timber columns. We thought it was a beautiful timber and we should find a use for after it. Our engeneer actualy told us that it would be more environmentally friendly to just burn it so it would generate more energy for use than putting effort to take it down, transportting it, giving it to someone. They were already in a shape that people don't want. All that energy would be really wasted just for this idea of "recycling". It's interesting, I would never thought that early on.

In an article by the guardian, the headline says "let's hope they will soon be planning cities". How do you feel about this and do you think that Assemble's experimental process can be done in a large scale?

Jane - That is very interesting. Someone said that the model for architecture practice is growth: you get more work and employ more people and you're sucessful based on the number of people that work for you. And Joe, from Assemble, said to a journalist "What if we don't grow? What if we just stay the same size? What if we are a group of 16 friends that never grow?".

It depends on what size that you have but at the same time I would really like to see how an Assemble's skyscraper looks like. We do urban planning sometimes in competitions, it's something we're interested in. And what we do in Goldsmith's Art Gallery is a real building, is a real kind of ecosystems' spaces, that has a very specific client who is publicly funded. It's got the University, the Education, it's quite sensitive. There is the existing building, it is something we have never done before and it is a different scale. There is much more formal agreements, so we have very little to say about how it is going to be runned and how it is going to be managed. We proposed to them a vision about public space, about interaction and about how the spaces are to be used. But the university and the client get to say what will happen. It's letting go that kind of control and maybe we don't know what will happen as the scale changes.

The way Assemble works is basicaly completely experimental and completely educational. So everything is new to us. If we were given something that was urban planning, we would give a shot, we wouldn't know what we're doing, but we would really discuss it to try to work out. There is definitely a sense of we'll give anything we can and we will work out as we do it and try.

Maybe it’s ok if some things only happen on a small scale and if some things only happen on a big scale, which don’t happen on a small scale. I think that as long as we are doing this thing, we are all talking to each other and we’ll know what’s happening. Like, I know exactly what is happening in the Goldmisth's Project right now as I know exactly what’s happening in a small graphic design project that we’re doing. Transparency within the company is the most important thing.

In another article published by The Guardian, entitled "Power to the people Power to the people! Assemble win the Turner prize by ignoring the art market", Adrian Searle says that "The danger of projects like theirs is that it will be seen to replace government intervention, leading to further withdrawals of public funds and further atomisation." Do you think that your work can be confused with public services?

Jane - Yes, that is a big problem, right? We started in 2010 which was when David Cameron was first elected and his slogan was “Big Society” which was about reducing public spending and give authonomy to people to “do things themselves”. But how people do things themselves with no resources? I feel that there is this problem that a lot of people might read that our projects are done on an economy, that we use maybe cheap and industrial materials that it plays into this rethoric about austherity and scarcity. But we were seeing what was possible as architects, it was really selfish, it was really in the world of architectural education and architectural profession. And the act of doing it made us realize how it had a social impact, we weren’t aware of it untill someone gave a feedback and we saw that it was much more politicaly intense than we first imagined.

And people accused us of playing in the “Big Society”. I think it’s this problem that you also have in Brazil now that is the cultural being destroyed, there is no money for art, there is no money for humanities, there is no money for projects in the UK anymore. And I feel we’ve moved away from that now. I think it is important to show what’s possible and to give greater agency to communities and architects, to not just stop working when there is no money. But I don’t really buy into the thing like Alejandro Aravena that projects can only work in severe poverty or scarcety.

And actualy a lot of our projects are publicly funded, so Blackhorse Workshop was with the local Council. A lot of the funding for Liverpool was also public, so a lot of the money behind our projects are actualy coming through public funding. And it’s very difficult because there is not so much as it used to be. It’s a bit of a dilema, but I don’t think we are substitutes necessarily. That is one of those things that we are aware of, but there is not much we can do about it, you know? You have to pursue what you are interested in and just be aware of. So many things come up as a result of what you do that you can’t perceive or cannot see what someone might say about your project.

A lot of our practices is about finding mutually helpful relationships like renting our studios for other people cover our studio space and our costs. So we can continue to build things from 1 to 1 scale, but at the same time we make sure that our studio space is super affordable, which is something that you can’t find elsewhere in London.

Yesterday, while talking about your playground projects you criticized the contemporary culture of fear. How does Assemble reacts to this ever growing survailance and control of spaces?

Jane - I think that this is a bigger question that maybe the architectural industry in the whole of the UK hasn't quite worked out how it fits to that conversation, which is quite a political one. I think that most people can understand the idea of surveillance as being negative but people who are designing public space haven't really realize what effect it has in reality. In Kingscross, homeless people were threathened they would be ejected from the public space by security guards but they have no legal authority to do it, they are not police. And I feel that british public can tolerate quite a lot, they are very polite, they don't want to question even if something is not correct and should be challenged.

I think architects should have a really high degree of agency to challenge the surveillance culture, but we don't know that we do. Architects could just through simple acts of design change how the space is navigated and controlled, but they don't do it. That is a big problem. Assemble is particularly aware and interested in that.

The corporatization and surveillance of public space is a big problem. The fact that a company will define how you conduct yourself in public is really dangerous actualy.

We did this public space project in Croydon, New Addington, where is in the only place in the UK where if there are more than 2 people under the age of 16 hanging out the police will come and separate you, they legally are allowed to disperse more than 2 people. So you can't have a group of 17 years old sitting on the street and chatting. This becomes a problem when there is nothing else for people to do, when there is no youth centers, there is no activities, there is nothing free for prople to do. They hang out together in public and this is seen as quite threathening, but they're just children.

So we put things like a skateboarding ramp, all this stuff so people are doing productive things. They're using it for their own, they're not here to just smoke drugs and do "bad things", it's really banal and it's fine. It's crazy.

Why do they have this law there, is it a very violent place? It looks like a curfew.

Jane - They're scared of violence. It's really weird. I feel that the UK operates all fear, like today with the whole leaving the European Union [Brexit]. Nothing is real, nothing is actual. Maybe there is in an isolated instance, but I'm sure there are no incidents of two 14 years old causing severe damage for anything or anybody just because they hang out in public. It's the fear that they might. The fear of this imaginary world, the fear of others. The UK is becoming really susceptible to this kind of thing.

I just couldn't believe in that Brexit today, I didn't think we would do it, it's so extraordinary. It's a self-perpertuated thing, if you think it's gonna happen, you do things that make it happen and it will happen. So there is gonna be more violence, there is gonna be more problems. The way people live, the fact that we need to build more housing, all is gonna become really isolated.

But I think that it is really naïve feeling when growing up that history was about progress and things getting better. I see all the stuff now and think "That was stupid!", time is not linear. Britain

leaving the European Union is one of these decisive moments in History that are gonna define the rest of my life. Maybe we're redrawing that map, but not in my life-time. Now Europe is different. Scarry.

Changing a little bit the subject… Did your idea of art or architecture change after you won the Turner Prize?

Jane - The Turner Prize is more about the nomination than about the winning, but that made us really aware that there was such a divide between architecture and art. And I felt a lot of us are quite confortable talking to architects and hadn't really realize that there is a whole separate world that define ourselves. Maybe the other people in the group who didn't have an architecture training were not that surprised by it and thought it was obvious. But what is really weird in the UK is that the term "architect" is a professionaly protected title, yet the architecture industry is really much more accepting to anyone who does architecture regardeless of their background. You have people like Thom Heatherwick who are not trained architects but everyone in architecture accepts him as being an architect. Everyone in architecture would accept Assemble in architecture even if none of us are qualified. When in the art world some people would say "You are not artists". That's fine, who cares if we're artists? They are so hostile, it's really weird and maybe that made us realize how accepting architecture is.

And we are so aware that the artistic industry in the UK realized that they've become disconnected, they realized that they don't have the same kind of reach that they thought they had. They've used us in order to enlive a debate and talk about what is art, so we use them to talk about architecture and make it happen. There were some projects in Granby, like the Winter Garden, the Green House project that were just ideas for us, but because we were nominated we applied for funding and now it is happening.

We feel like we are not that engaged to it because that is not very important to us. Work is important, the labels are not. But we kind of set on the sideline to just watch people getting really aggitated. We kind of enjoyed to see it.

Could you tell us what are your inspirations and references in architecture? It can be as Assemble or as you, Jane.

Jane - Everyone in Assemble like different things. There is a lot of people who are interested in crafts and making and in the UK there is a world of architecture where you've got some small scale practices, maybe we have like maximum 15, 30 people who are really interested in crafts like Caruso St John. They're quite weird and quite suiss on their approach you know? Really on material and objects. We respect them, someone in Assemble works for Caruso St John. And I was trained by 6A Architects. Different people in Assemble have different idols, I suppose..

And what about William Morris?

Jane - I feel like the world has changed [laughs], and we shoudn't shy away from that world. Maybe in Assemble more than anyone I'm much more interested in what people of our age are doing rather than architects. Rather than anyone doing a cool work, like architects who I really respect. But I'm much more interested in people who don't

know what they're doing, so people who are in their 20's, who have some training, so they're very like aware of what it's stake, they completely understand what the process is and also are not conditioned to worry about the world in the same way.

William Morris is difficult because maybe he was a complete failure in his own terms. His ideia was to democratize production and to make beautiful art avaible to everybody, yet because it wasn't, he wasn't able to do that. He basicaly made beautiful wallpaper for very rich people and he's also 250 years old now, so much happened in the world, so much exciting stuff. Why are we still talking from this 18th century upper middle-class?

There is a new art call Council that 2 people of Assemble wrote and they're talking about William Morris. So this is the thing: if you talk to different people from Assemble they like different artists. William Morris is cool but you have to understand him in his context, he was avant-garde, he could afford to do what he did, he was working at the moment before we really understood the degree of true capitalism. He was like a war of contradictions. The only thing that survives that is so compelling is that the work is beautiful. That was what he has focused on, and that is what Assemble do uniformly, we always talk about the work. What has happened in this piece of work, what is the work about rather than in larger issues. Because we have to change everyday, we might do one thing one day and in the other day do another thing. But the work is the important thing, and I feel like there is a lot of romanticism in it, when there is probably much more exciting stuff literally happening right now. If we stop valuing history so much and value contemporary, embrace contradiction, embrace complexity, embrace the fact that someone might be working for a really corporate client and might be able to do something really extraordinary? So what's the good that come out of this?

So what about Lina Bo Bardi, what's your main interest in her?

Jane - Assemble have done projects about Lina Bo Bardi, an exihbition showcase idea about her work. We've been involved for a longtime and that's how first I've got to know her work. I'm super interested in the fact that the modernist architects of that period had these illusions that they would make architecture a democratic process. So Bo Bardi is working with people in the site, she gives a lot of authonomy to the students working in her studio, but yet everything is definitely very Lina Bo Bardi, there is definetely an aesthetic, there is definitely a way you can see she was very controling as an architect. I feel that a lot of the contemporary narrative today is trying to force architects to give up their control to kind of apologize to have an aesthetic identity. "Oh, you know, this should be given over to the community and what they say is really good". I think we should look into the post-war period modernists who were really aware about the everyday life and how people were living, but were kind of utopian and visionary, and still very decisive about the production and the design process.

They took and listened not just from the community, but also from other experts. So Lina Bo Bardi was working with artists and designers. In the UK the Smithson were doing the same thing, working with artists and designers but still very much retaining a sense of importance of what architectural training and architectural eye, what the power of being an architect can do. think we don't have to give up that narrative to community and to engagement. We don't have to

apologize, I don’t think that architects have to apologize all the time. And these are people who are showing you that you don’t have to do that.

I worry today that maybe comtemporary collectives, groups who are interested in different forms of how architecture can be made, are being celebrated because they are showing something that is different to the capitalism rethoric. But maybe there is not much ambition to remake the world anew, there is a kind of acceptance. And I think Assemble is guilty of that as well, like acceptance of austherity, aceptance of what’s possible, acceptance kind of quite victimized by what people say you should do.

And then in the post-war period it was young people just giving so much agency to design, in London anyway. Patronised by the worldfare state, patronise by public funding, you’ve got Patrick Hodgkinson, Neil Brown who do huge megastructure Council Housing and they were just like trying out. And I feel there is maybe a level of ambition is lost. I worry that it is being lost by groups today who are just very apologetic and “We do new interesting thing but we’re not really designing it…”. And maybe we should be like “This is the process: we've listened to you but this is what we’re doing”.

The more I perceive what was happening in the 1960’s, the more I feel there is a discrepancy in ambition today. I don’t know if that’s true, but that is what I’m writting a PHD about.

In this sense modernist architects really thought about architecture as a social project. In a very ambitious way, as if architecture could engage a macro social transformation. Nowadays it seems that studios like Assemble are more reacting to very critical situations, such as privatization of public space, than looking for general answers and models of urbanization. Do you believe it is still possible to create universal models in architecture? That also refers to the question we’ve asked about Assemble operating in a larger scale.

Jane - I think it has a lot to do with architectural education as separating things. But the big question in the UK is housing problems, housing crisis. And at least in the 1960’s and 1970’s they were trying to apply this idea of highrise and high-density, but trying to create something that was still sociable and had a free public space below the pilotis. There was an ambition to that and Habitats, the Expo 1967 in Canada when Moshe Safdie is doing this crazy thing that actualy gets built. It was an idea of how we might live, and it feels that now we are all so overwelmed by the problem that we just think about fixing the problem. I don’t really know what like the vision of the future looks like today unless it’s some dystopic digital crazy surveillance drone infested thing. I don’t know what an idea of contemporary public housing would look like.

At least Moshe Safdie in 1967 in Canada was trying to propose something which looks really radical. The fact that these [radical post-war projects] exists, the fact that you can see it and visit it today is a remimder that once there was an alternative that someone was proposing. I think it’s important that we try building these things.

What are you asking yourself now?

Jane - We have so many questions like “What’s for lunch?”. Lunch is a big deal for us, we cook for each other every single day. We have

like a rota, you have to cook. Assemble is still like an experiment. From the outside it might look very controlled and mysterious as if we know what we’re doing but actualy we don’t know what we’re doing. So the important thing is always question it. What we’re doing and why we’re doing. When a new project happens we always ask why are we doing it. What’s exciting about it? Why would we do this? Because it’s never financial, it’s always about what questions this is asking us. And I think a lot of practicers don’t have that because they have employees and they need to survive. And we try our hardest to make sure we can survive in a way that doesn’t affect how we choose our work, so we have complete freedom. Which means that individuals have complete freedom to choose their work. It’s really weird, like being collective as a way of supporting being individual.