

Conversation with Fabrizio Furiassi

24 November 2025 *Translated form Italian by the Author*

A while ago, on November 24th 2025, I had a conversation with the architect Fabrizio Furiassi, who participated in a project that contributed to the creation of a mesh network in Arnhem, New York. I received his contact through a friend. Although this case is geographically and contextually distant from my main area of interest, which focuses on Italy and its hacktivist history, the conversation was still useful in understanding alternative ways of building networks that differ from those I have encountered so far in my research.
In Arnhem, the network is affiliated with New York Mesh, an association that actively organizes and provides materials for the development of mesh connectivity in the New York area. This represents a different organizational model from the one proposed by Ninux.org, which deliberately avoids formal organization, even as a free association, in order to maintain a fully communitarian and non-hierarchical approach. In the case of Rete Appenninica, the organizational roles are instead entirely distributed across the community, due to the very different context in which the network emerged.
Another particularly valuable outcome of this conversation came from asking Fabrizio about his position as an outsider contributing to the construction of a network in a specific local context, and about the approach a designer should take in such situations, or at least the approach he personally adopted. It was insightful to reflect on the importance of stepping back to follow the needs of a community or a territory, and then stepping forward only when intervention becomes truly necessary and beneficial for those who live there.

LM:
First of all, I wanted to discuss your attitude, as an external designer, when interacting with a context and a situation that is situated and belongs to a community you are not directly part of.

FF:
So, to get an internet network, as a designer, without technical knowledge, you need to activate a social network, create a network of people, each with their own skills. In this context, the architect has to take a step back. While normally the architect comes in and gives you the solution to the problem, in this case the architect positions themselves within a network, a web of different actors who collaborate to reach the project outcome.

The idea behind which we are presenting this project is a Biennale that is, by the way, coming to a close. The project fits within the discourse on collective intelligence, because we propose this shift of the architect figure from “architect as genius” to “architect as facilitator.” Not that we claim to be the first to have done this, it is a fairly well-trodden discourse, but in our small way we are trying to carry these ideas forward in this project, which is the only project we have and one we are doing independently.

One of the problems with this type of project is that there is no financial backing: there is no client, there is no developer putting money into building this network. Often, designers, activists, or people working in this sector fund themselves through grants. You win a grant — which is what we did — from either a private institution or a public administration, they give you some money, usually a modest amount, and with that little money you try to do something.

Now, what is the problem? The problem is that the money is finite, it is a fixed, predetermined sum. At some point, the money runs out. And one of the things we are reflecting on is precisely this: you cannot base this type of urban intervention simply on funds obtained through grants, because those funds are finite and do not renew. If they do renew, there is always the uncertainty of whether they will or not. So one important thing to reflect on is how an intervention of this kind becomes self-sustaining. And this is a challenge.

It is a challenge, for example, in the case of *NYC Mesh*. NYC Mesh is an organization (a grassroots organization) whose mission is to bring free internet to the entire city of New York. They work with these devices, these small antennas, though they can also build hubs: there are large antennas, and smaller private antennas connect to those hubs. Anyone can contact them and buy an antenna: if there is line of sight with another antenna or with a hub, you can access the internet signal.

Now, they fund themselves entirely through donations and the occasional grant they win. But most of the funding comes from donations and the voluntary work of people who are part of the mesh group: people motivated by social, and I would say almost political, ideals, who make their time available to do this.

LM:
I’d like to ask about the history of the project, how it started, and what the defining moments of this experience were, starting from the premises.

FF:
We started this project after winning a grant. It was a grant from Columbia University — we are talking about four years ago — which already gives a sense of the timeframe. Unlike the projects that an architect typically works on, where there is real pressure on timelines — trying to deliver in the shortest time possible, which is the mantra of developers and clients — in our case, deliberately, we did things differently. We did not set a deadline; we did not say the project had to be completed by a certain date. The project had to be developed in whatever time it required.

Even so, initially we felt some pressure to give an answer, or at least offer some help, in response to the fact that everything had shifted online, we are talking about the time of the pandemic. Around 2020–2021, it had become clear that everything had moved to the internet. In 2020 the pandemic broke out globally. In 2021 we started this project, trying to respond to the problem that had emerged.

Having conducted a survey of the area, we realised that many people in New York — despite its image as a highly advanced city — actually had poor connectivity or did not have it at all. On the map alone there were areas where people could not connect. This was due to various reasons. One might be infrastructure that simply does not work. Another might be that maybe you don’t own a proper device, there is connectivity available but no computer or phone to access it. Another might be that you have the device but cannot afford to pay for an internet connection, because it is too expensive. In New York, a basic internet connection costs 60 to 80 dollars a month, which is quite a high chost, not like in Italy, where it costs around 10 euros a month.

Then there is also the issue of digital literacy. Generationally, older people face this problem because they are unable to use the internet, they do not know how. These are more or less the problems that determine the lack of digital connectivity, of internet access, access to information and services that are available online. We are talking about the pandemic period, so this also meant access to vaccines and medical personnel. And we were particularly concerned about remote education, because

there were many students, many young people, who could not access remote schooling, having no computer and no stable internet connection. These were, looking at the map, predominantly people living in the poorer areas of the city.

So there is a kind of digital segregation that creates inequalities. I don't know if you have ever heard the term redlining? In the United States, during the era of racial segregation, there were red lines drawn on maps that identified and distinguished certain areas of the city. If you lived in certain zones, you were denied access to certain things, for example, you could not obtain a mortgage, because banks would not lend you money. And so this automatically created an immediate inequality between those who lived in certain areas and those who lived in others.

Over generations, this translated into an accumulation of property. That is to say: if I have access to a bank mortgage, I can buy a house and pass it on to my children, who can pass it on to their children, and so wealth accumulates across generations. If instead you live somewhere where you cannot access a mortgage or bank financing, you cannot buy a house and are forced to remain a tenant and so you have nothing to transfer, nothing to pass on. I think this is an argument that could be made about other types of assets as well, other things that can be transferred, knowledge, perhaps. That is something you will be able to investigate: what can be transferred and what cannot, precisely because of a form of *digital redlining*.

I should say, I do not study these things, I am carrying out this project but I do not have a very broad knowledge of other experiences. You certainly have more background. So I can give you indications about what I am doing, and share some of the reflections that occasionally come to me, but I do not have a very clear picture of the whole matter.

That is roughly the premise. Then, how the project developed over these last four years; quite slowly, because working with communities is not simple.

First of all, we built partnerships: not only with *NYC Mesh*, but also with other local organisations, because *NYC Mesh* alone is not enough. *NYC Mesh* is an organisation that does one specific thing. You need other organisations that do other things, if you want to build a network.

We collaborated in particular with an organisation called the *Center for Justice Innovation*, whose mission is crime prevention, focused especially on young people at risk of entering the justice system, of committing crimes and ending up in prison, in the juvenile detention system. They run activities designed to prevent this, primarily workshops and collective activities for which participants are also paid, through funding. They apply for municipal and state grants — frequent grant cycles, sometimes quarterly — which they are often able to win because many of these calls are semi-internal, or at least open only to certain organisations. With that funding, they can organise a basketball tournament and pay the young people who take part, or run workshops and pay the participants.

Among those workshops, we eventually joined in, and we have now been running these workshops with the young people for some time. We usually hold them on Saturdays, in their free time, not during the week, because we both have other jobs. When I say "we," I mean myself and another

person. We started this together. Her name is Catherine, Catherine with a C.

These workshops have the problem that they need to be organised. It often happens that something comes up, that someone does not show. There have even been times when we went and nobody came. There is always that uncertainty. You make your time available, you do this thing, but then on the other side, what I mean is that the interest in participating in these things is not a given.

The architect has their own interest. We do it willingly, we do it for free, but we also have an interest. Everyone has an interest. We are interested in making a project that can improve space. Not necessarily, at least this is the starting point, because you have to imagine that things change, that you talk to people, that it is a dialogic process. So when you start talking to people, your own ideas change too. There is a starting point, there is an intermediate point, and then perhaps there will be an end point when we conclude this first iteration of the project, which is still ongoing.

So when you start something lightly, perhaps with the spirit of wanting to do something useful for the community while using your skills as an architect, you then realise that your idea is not what is actually needed. You arrive wanting to do one thing, and then you understand that what you wanted to do serves no purpose — something else needs to be done, because nobody is interested in the first thing. So trajectories change.

Since this is a project that is, as I said, long and deliberately slow, there are also moments of real interruption. Right now, for example, we are at a standstill and not doing anything. We are waiting for responses, waiting to be able to start the workshops again, waiting. And we have also reached the conclusion that instead of doing what we originally wanted to do, we will do something else, much simpler, but at least it will put a first full stop on this iteration. Then we will see.

But did you have questions you wanted to ask?

LM:
Yes, I wanted to ask you about the kinds of activities you proposed in the workshops, and also how they changed over time, given what you mentioned.

FF:
So, in the workshops, both I and Catherine teach at university, so we shaped this a bit like a lighter version of an architecture course, where we teach the basics of architectural design. Starting from the very first things: learning to survey spaces, learning to take measurements, learning to work to scale, making models. Then there is a whole other dimension that is more about talking, talking about architecture, about how space has an impact on our lives and trying to collect the ideas of the young people to understand in what ways they might transform the spaces they inhabit.

We started these workshops with a group of young people from NYCHA public housing. NYCHA stands for *New York City Housing Authority*, the body that administers and produces certain types of public housing, which here they call "the projects."

What often happens with these projects? Residential buildings are developed, with units of various sizes, which are assigned through applications, a bit like in Italy, a bit like everywhere when it comes to public housing. There are calls, waiting lists, units get assigned, and you end up there. One of the problems, however, is that when these buildings

are constructed they are left to fend for themselves. There are many issues that are not addressed, that go unresolved, with nobody taking care of them.

There are, however, organisations that try to do something, starting from neighbourhood associations. These associations carry out a real act of resistance. The State does nothing, and we push back, but we have to do it together, because nobody can manage alone. If there is a problem in the building and you send an email, nobody replies, nobody does anything. But if you organise, if you build a network, if you make noise, then perhaps your voice becomes louder and someone listens. That is why neighbourhood organisations exist.

Here, every neighbourhood, every block, is almost like a self-contained city. There is its own neighbourhood association, its own supermarket, its own church; there is a real community on every block. You only need to walk 300 metres to find yourself in a completely different situation.

I am talking about Manhattan in particular. We are working in Harlem, which is a vast neighbourhood; there is East Harlem, Central Harlem, and West Harlem. We are working specifically in East Harlem, which is the poorest part of the neighbourhood. This is also because there are community boards, a community board is like a political sub-district of the municipality. It is similar to what in Rome, where I am from, we call a *circoscrizione* — a borough subdivision — which I believe exists in other cities too. The city is divided into these subdivisions, each with a political representative who deals with issues that are certainly very pressing but not large enough to be handled directly by the mayor's office.

Here there is a community board that is, naturally, quite large, we are talking about a neighbourhood with hundreds of thousands of people, almost like a city in its own right. I believe — and I would not want to get this wrong — that Central and West Harlem together have around 80,000 people, if I am not mistaken. So roughly speaking, perhaps 100,000 people live in the neighbourhood, which makes it a large one, comparable in size to some Italian towns and cities.

This means that when studies are carried out, there are many people working within these subdivisions, and they produce reports. Within these reports we found something — a map that described very clearly — I can send it to you if you like, I only showed it briefly — a map where you could see that there was no internet, or at least that the level of connectivity was lower compared to other neighbourhoods in the city.

The whole thing actually grew out of that, in fact, the first meetings we held were after a community board meeting, because every association, every community organisation, often has monthly meetings. So there is also a rhythm, a monthly rhythm of gatherings: this might be a useful detail for you. People do not always stay involved; sometimes someone disappears, as has happened to us. In fact, that is also one of the reasons we interrupted the workshops: the person who was organising them for us vanished. The person who was helping us coordinate stopped being in touch, stopped calling, stopped answering. Every now and then they would send an email with some vague excuse, a family problem, the kind of things children make up when they do not want to go to school. At a certain point we understood that we could no longer work with this person.

This may be a particular case — I do not know how far it can be generalised — but it gives you a sense of how difficult it is to work with communities and with people, because there is always something unexpected, always an incident, always something that comes up. And yet, despite this, there are meetings that try to regularise things, to give a rhythm to the networking process, in contrast, I think, to precisely these kinds of problems. The fact that people meet every month is meant to prevent things from slipping through unnoticed, to prevent someone from disappearing and certain issues from no longer being raised or resolved. So people meet to take stock of the situation, usually at least once a month.

LM:
Can I ask how did the meetings unfold?

FF:
There are different types of meetings. If you meet with the community board, they now hold them all online, so everything is remote. But you have to write emails and ask for permission to participate. Someone asks you to send a link and tells you yes, you can join. Then, if you want to present something, you need to be put on a presentation schedule, where you present something and receive feedback and questions. Usually there are presentations and Q&As in these meetings.

Some people participate only as observers, but generally speaking these are meetings with a moderator, usually someone with an almost political role, or at least a senior figure within the organisation. Then there are the participants, who in the case of the community board are all the residents of that community board district — anyone can attend because it is open to the public — but there are also local administrators. So you have the organisers, who are usually from the municipality, then local administrators, then representatives of local organisations, and then residents. I believe anyone can request to participate and even to present, though we have not done so on other occasions.

When you do present, you receive feedback, this is specific to the community board and has a somewhat more political character. Then for neighbourhood meetings, you also need to look into whether and how you can participate. At these, when you arrive you have to sign a sheet where your presence is registered — I am honestly not sure why — but you also give your contact details, so you end up becoming part of that network.

The meetings with *NYC Mesh*, on the other hand, are a bit more informal. They also have evening meetups where they typically gather in a bar or some other venue and anyone can come. They post it on their website and say: "We will meet on this day, at this time, at this place." Usually there are a few Mesh representatives, and then people show up either because they are curious and want to learn more and have questions, or because they want to collaborate. In fact, that is exactly how we started our collaboration, we saw on their website that there were regular meetups, and one day we just showed up. That is how it began.

For the other types of meetings, on the other hand, you have to make more of an effort to get authorised and gain access. So there are these differences: sometimes you need authorisation, or someone to introduce you; other times you can simply show up in person.

Then there are the workshops, which, in principle, are not closed; the public could attend. But we perhaps made a mistake, because we did not publicise them very much, so

probably not many people knew we were doing this. As a result, the participants were only those invited by the staff at the Center for Justice Innovation.

This was also partly due to the question of compensation. We were conscious of a rather problematic tendency in the architecture sector of having people do unpaid internships, less so in Italy perhaps, but in general there is this tendency toward the exploitation of labour. In these workshops we are not working on a project from which we derive any financial return, we gain nothing in that sense. But we do gain in the sense that we get to realise an architectural project that I genuinely care about doing. So the question of people who work with you — who are not part of the project as such but still invest their time, their ideas, engage with you — we felt it was right that they should be compensated.

We would also bring pizza, snacks, and drinks, so in the end it was a way of being together, having a laugh, enjoying ourselve, regardless of the final outcome of the project, it was a way of building community. So there is also this dimension: sometimes these kinds of operations can be ends in themselves. They do not necessarily have to be aimed at an objective, they are aimed at the very objective of being together, in that precise moment, not with the goal of producing something afterward.

So in this sense it could be an endless series of meetings, it could be that we continue like this indefinitely and the project never reaches a conclusion. And perhaps that is also part of what makes it beautiful: it is a project that is more of a lifestyle, a personal participation within the very network we are talking about. So in the end, that is the purpose: the purpose is to participate, the purpose is to be inside the network; it is not the network itself that has to lead somewhere.

I think this is important. It is true that there are specific missions — the internet network allows you to do things — but it is the internet network itself, as I said at the beginning, that creates a new way of understanding relationships. And so this type of gathering, these bottom-up networks, is a very specific way — though always different in practice — of making, of having, of building the society we live in. That is what I think.

So architecture in general is this: architecture is building relationships, relationships that are a mix of material and immaterial components. There is the material component — which includes our bodies, physically going somewhere and doing things — the place where we are, the project we are working on, our ideas. And then there is the component of ideas, the digital component, the component of emails, all these immaterial components that nevertheless also have a material dimension. I am a materialist, so I think everything has to do with a material dimension: even the internet has the network, the wire, the cable, the wave, there is always a material dimension, the antenna, the computer. The digital exists, but it is always grounded in the real, material world. So it is the material world that underlies all of this.

But what interests me, I think, and what distinguishes this network from other social configurations, is the assemblage, the form this network takes.

LM:
I think it is very much aligned with what actually inspired me to do this research. Precisely this last point, the fact that through creating this network, you also end up creating a sense of community, this kind of participation. And also what I was getting at earlier: how this type of practice might lead to imagining a new way of understanding social organisation, or a certain kind of cooperative participation.

Another thing that came to mind. I also spoke with a community network that was born near Bologna, again because of the digital divide, because connectivity there simply did not work. They self-organised and built their own connection. Something interesting that Cristina — the person I spoke with — told me she had a more technical perspective on this. One thing she said that struck me was about how these community mesh networks contrast in an interesting way with the basic internet infrastructure: they have a kind of fluidity by nature, both from a technical point of view and in terms of how they are built, because by their nature they tend to be more accessible, since they are built by and with a community. But also at the level of their configuration, they have a way of existing that tends to be very malleable: the various nodes are able to reorganise themselves, given how the protocols are designed, how this type of connection works. This interested me a great deal, and it connects to the last point you made, it is almost as if these kinds of interventions open up a new way of imagining a certain future of connectivity.

FF:
Absolutely. And then there is also the whole question of how you explain the project, imagine arriving at a meeting of people who may be of a certain age, who have no idea what you are talking about. How do you explain it? That is a real challenge.

One of the simplest things people immediately understand is this: you say, look — the internet you have at home arrives through a cable underground; this instead works through the air. There are antennas that connect to each other, and people immediately understand that this is an alternative system, a different system. Then you tell them that if they want, they can buy an antenna, put it in their home, receive internet — and immediately they understand that they can have their own autonomy. That is, you can disconnect from the existing commercial infrastructure; you can say, I am no longer paying for cable internet, I am cancelling my subscription and connecting through this antenna. You spend 300 dollars, you set up the device, and then you are free. So it is a kind of liberation from a system that constrains you — because you have to have internet, and if you do not have it you are excluded. So you have to pay, you have to accept the prices, you have to follow the rules set by the provider.

And in fact there is another related problem: the free public Wi-Fi networks in cities. These are networks often installed in street fixtures that give you internet, but they are all placed according to commercial logic — fundamentally, they give you internet so that you walk down that street, perhaps as a tourist without a local SIM card, and end up making purchases. And above all, they take your data. There is a whole issue around data, because when you use the internet you produce data, and if there is a line — I do not know if providers actually steal your data, but probably yes, even the ones you pay for — but especially the free ones tend to compensate by taking your data. Every time you connect to one of these street hotspots, you have to approve, you have to tick some boxes — you do not read them because they are enormously long terms and conditions — so you just tick the box, press OK, and connect. And meanwhile they are taking everything you produce, all the data you generate while browsing.

So one of the things about NYC Mesh is that they do not take your data. We are dealing with a system that is essentially extractive, you are given access to the network so that things can be extracted from you. It is a bit like saying: I give you the motorway so that you drive your car, and alongside needing fuel and going from A to B, I get rid of the train. I force you onto the road because I build you a nice motorway, then I tell you the train does not work properly, there are problems, I force you to buy a car, and meanwhile I extract money from you because you need fuel. The logic is similar: the infrastructure, when you have no alternative, forces you to play by its rules. And so this is a system that positions itself as an alternative to that, that frees you, at least partially, from it.

We also had a conversation specifically about architecture, something I have not mentioned yet. The idea is to create architectural projects that can give visibility to an invisible network. Mesh is invisible, and many people do not know about it, do not know it exists, perhaps there is even Mesh in their neighbourhood. It is not everywhere yet; it is ex-

panding slowly, in that fluid way you were describing. But one of our objectives is to build a hub: we will build a hub with part of the funds we have, installing a large antenna on one of the public housing buildings, which will contribute to extending Mesh into this neighbourhood. I live in Harlem, so we will be contributing to this in our own neighbourhood, extending their vision.

But to return to what I wanted to say earlier: since these are digital systems, they are often invisible systems. If you do not know, you cannot see it; you do not know it exists, you do not even think to become part of it. So these networks also need visibility, a visibility that allows interested people to connect, to enter the network. And this, at least as far as our project is concerned, is where I think the material, architectural dimension of space comes into play. We envision making works, the first will be a kind of installation that also integrates the hub: there will be this hub on the rooftop of a building, connected to an installation in the space below, in the internal courtyard of the public housing complex, where there are gardens and small structures that are all currently abandoned. We will try to reactivate these structures by integrating internet into them.

So starting from that and then extending this internet connection to other public housing buildings in the neighbourhood, or even beyond the neighbourhood, extending this network. But this passes not only inside people's homes, because internet is ultimately something one wants to bring into people's homes, given the problems we discussed at the beginning about those who cannot connect. There is also, however, a conversation about internet in the street, internet in general, in shared spaces, and that is what we are working on in particular: the shared space where you can engage, where you can make things visible. Public space, not private space, in private space you are in your own home, and I cannot see what is inside your house.

When we talk about public space, we are not using the word "public" in the generic sense. I mean it as publicness, you can make things public within that space, not commercial advertising, but publicity in the sense of building a public life where people can see things, engage with one another, share. So it is a bit about this: working in public space.

And in the United States — this is also another problem — we are used to Italy, where there is this public dimension of space: there are piazzas, there are parks, there are publicly governed spaces you can enter, buildings that are public. Here that public dimension is much less present, even so-called public spaces are often privately owned public spaces. That is also a problem. These networks, these organisations, are also trying to do something about this, I think, trying to create networks that stand in contrast to this. Though I should not use the word "contrast," because contrast implies conflict. I used it earlier and I am telling myself not to, I do not think there is actually a contrast, not a clash, not a fight, or rather there is a struggle but it is more subtle. It is not as if people are out in the streets rioting because they have no internet — maybe that will happen someday — but it is more a matter of adding, of bringing something, of improving.

There is also a project they are working on called "the beautification", making things more beautiful, meaning more pleasant, more comfortable, more useful. Beauty helps you do well. And so within a broader discourse about wellbeing, about having comfort, there is also the question of having a social life, having services available, and therefore having internet as well. That is it.

LM:
Yes, it is interesting from the perspective that, thinking back to what you said about how internet in commercial public spaces operates as an extractive system, and in general, from what I have been researching, even the internet you pay for is a system that imposes rules and involves a certain degree of data extraction. I find it interesting that with this type of project there is both the creation of an alternative and a kind of re-centring of what connectivity is actually about people and community, rather than a private system imposed from above. And I think it is also interesting that with your project you want to expand this into public space. Also because, very simply, there is something interesting here, especially in Italian, connessione means connection. So it is fitting, in a way, that this actually becomes a real connection between people, rather than what the internet is increasingly becoming in this historical moment. There is also a kind of breaking open of a black box that exists in

FF:
Absolutely, yes, that is exactly it. There is a great need to be together, a great need to build networks, as we were saying. Because through the network everything is possible, you can find support for resolving the problems we all encounter in our lives. Otherwise one can withdraw and isolate. When you go to these meetings, everyone has their own problem, someone says: "I have this issue, the door won't open." I do not know how useful this is to you, but in general that is roughly how it works: everyone brings their own problem and carries it into the community. They say: "Look, there's this thing." And that is also, I think, the space of the network.

Then there is a whole conversation about how far this network extends. I think there is a question about this specifically, because the internet network is infinite, you can communicate from here to wherever you are in the Netherlands, and we are talking right now. But if you want to meet in person, the matter changes. So networks have dimensions, and I think this is a line of reasoning worth developing: what is the difference between a human network, a network of people who meet in a room, and a network of people who meet online in a virtual space? What is the difference between the two? How do they integrate with one another? What can we learn from analysing them? There is a question of scale that needs to be explored, because there is a tendency to use the term "network" in a somewhat generalised way. Whereas it may well be that there are many different kinds of networks. So perhaps it is not just "the network" — perhaps it is "networks."

LM:
Yes, in fact this was also something I was thinking about while doing my research, how imagining this alternative and opening these doors also redefines what a network is in itself. A network can be any form of exchange, in general. There was also something that interested me: a perhaps somewhat dramatic reformulation, but a reconsideration that these types of interventions can bring to the concept of the network itself. And when I think of a network, the internet network is of one type, but perhaps a network — even thinking about the internet — can take different forms of connection. Perhaps within that network there are also other networks inside. So yes, that is definitely something worth investigating.

One last thing I wanted to ask you. Going back to what you mentioned earlier about the complications of engaging with a community, and the fact that you arrive as a designer with an idea that then changes through that engagement: I wanted to ask how the idea evolved — what the objectives were, what approach you wanted to take to build this network and interact with the place.

FF:
So, the first thing we did was arrive and say: we would like to build street kiosks. That was our very first project idea, the first iteration, which in the end was simply a way of spatialising the concept of bringing internet through architecture. That is, making installations, architectural or design devices that would contain the antenna.

So we arrived with this idea of positioning antennas in public space — on rooftops, on buildings — each taking a different form. These were small devices. But then we stopped pursuing this, because we began to understand that the space we were interested in and wanted to improve actually needed other things. The antenna was not what was needed, that is, we did not need something that simply reproduced the same function, because the Mesh antenna is already a device in its own right. The antenna we wanted to make had only one objective: to elevate the device, since it needed a certain height, but beyond that it did not do anything else. That was very limiting. We immediately understood this was not what we should be doing, because it would not have brought any real improvement to the space.

So what did we do? We started to engage in dialogue. We understood that we needed to talk to people, one conversation at a time, one person directly connecting with another, and another, and another. We spoke with a great many people, and each one gave us a slightly different perspective. Then we went to present the project at various institutions, we asked people for help, we asked around. We carried out a substantial outreach effort, connecting with those who were already working on public space, those interested in these issues, and the people who actually lived there. So the community boards, the neighbourhood organisations, the church, we really went everywhere and spoke to everyone. And this, rather than simplifying things, actually made everything more complicated.

And we understood that this was precisely the project. The project was talking, understanding, building networks, and from there we would eventually arrive at something. From that process we also understood that we, as architects, are one part of the mechanism, one element of the network, not the top of it. It is not that we had not understood this in principle, but we came to realise it concretely through this project. We were not so central, yes, we were the initiators, but it was more like setting something in motion that would then carry on by itself. And indeed it did carry on almost by itself. We also envisioned that, once we had done our part, someone else could take it forward in our place, that a resident, perhaps after doing the workshop with us, would take initiative and carry the thing forward and do something else with it. Not that this would necessarily become our life's work; this could be our contribution as architects.

So that is how it began. Then it changed, and we arrived at doing these workshops. During the workshops, a lot of ideas emerged from the young people who participated. And it was from there that the project changed again, and we reached the conclusion that we needed to build a canopy. One that, as it happens, already exists in some form: in the place where we are working there is an abandoned structure that has a kind of canopy shape, but it does not function because it has no covering, it is essentially a lattice, an abandoned skeleton in the courtyard of the public housing complex, serving no purpose. I can show you a photo later if you like.

So we thought: since the idea is to build a canopy where people can gather underneath and have internet access — that was roughly the concept — we arrived at the conclusion of building on top of the existing structure, attaching something to what is already there and constructing the canopy over it. Then, obviously, all the bureaucratic questions come into play when you want to do something like that, so you also have to figure out how to actually make it happen.

We have now reached the conclusion that we will do something much lighter — an intervention made with fabrics, textiles, draped over and lightly modifying the existing structure. Something like a wrap, think of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, for example, who used to wrap buildings. So a kind of wrap of this structure using donated materials, because there is always this dimension of participation to consider.

We have an organisation called Fab Scrap that will give us the fabrics free of charge, they collect fabric offcuts from industry waste. And we also won another grant from an engineering firm that was called Seelman at the time and is now called Pailin, these things change, as you can see. When we started, they had an internal grant programme called the Building Equity Initiative, an open call offering pro bono engineering services. They said: "We offer 10,000 dollars of free engineering services for this project because it interests us", a project that aligns with a non-commercial purpose. We won that grant. Now we have an engineer from Pailin — in the meantime four years have passed and the company has changed its name — who will help us when the time comes to do the structural calculations.

But we are in a kind of waiting mode, and that will also have an impact on the final project. Everything has an impact on what ultimately gets built, what a young person says in the workshop has an impact, the existing built environment has an impact, every meeting we attend brings something new. That is why I say it could potentially be an infinite project, because it can always change.

This is actually an intrinsic characteristic of design and architecture. Any designer or architect who starts a project could change it indefinitely, continually. There is no necessary end point unless you impose a deadline on yourself, and since we have not imposed one, it could potentially go on forever, because it keeps changing. All it takes is for someone to say: "Actually, I don't care at all about the canopy, we want new paving." And then you say, maybe now I want new paving, and everything changes. Then perhaps you run a workshop and discuss with the young people: "What do you think about new paving?" "Yes, great", and everything shifts again. It is a continuous process of becoming.

So at a certain point, as happens in any project if you want to actually realise something, you have to draw a line — you have to be the one to do it. That is it. And this is something I think about carefully: if you want to realise something within a process of this kind, you have to decide that there is an end, because potentially there isn't one.

LM:
It's interesting, very interesting, also as a way of doing design from below, starting with a decision-making process that takes into account the voices of the people who are there. Because sometimes, in the world of design or architecture, you see a strong impulse to impose... to impose ideas while assuming that the people on the ground want precisely that thing. Whereas starting from the bottom up is very interesting. And also, connected to the whole discourse around the network, it is interesting how both the practice of building the network and the practice of designing how to integrate it into space both start from the bottom up, directly from the community, rather than arriving from above.

FF:
Yes — in that sense, it goes back to the very beginning, the first thing I told you: when we started this project, we immediately imagined the architect taking a step back. Because this is a discipline obsessed with authorship. If you look at even the most famous architects who claim to be doing social architecture, doing community-oriented work, in reality, they all have their Instagram profiles, including myself, where they promote themselves. I think of someone like Andres Jacobs — I am not sure if you know him, I know him well because we studied together — he does many things, but it is all very authorial, very self-referential; every day he does nothing but post things about himself. He is not the only one — he is just a case I often find myself observing. There is this strong tendency in the profession, perhaps because it works with images and images need to be visible.

But there is this problem specific to the discipline of architecture, which differs from engineering in this respect. In engineering there is no "famous engineer" — well, there is Calatrava, but notice that people call him an architect, not an engineer. Because engineers do not have this obsession with authorship; they know they are doing a job where many professional figures contribute to creating a project. Engineering projects are often anonymous, who built the motorway? I have no idea. There is the Morandi Bridge, which then collapsed, but who built it? I do not know. Any given structure, any given bridge in any given city.

So when you talk about infrastructure — and internet is infrastructure, we are talking about computer engineers, communications engineers — these are infrastructural projects, and as such they differ somewhat from architectural projects in the end. There is less of that authorial dimension that often characterises design and architecture, and more of a collaborative dimension. And this is why infrastructure in some way reflects — the very concept of infrastructure, something infrastructural — what happens in the society that builds it, in the social assemblage that constructs it, where everything contributes equally and equitably to the making of the work.

Whereas in other contexts there is always someone who positions themselves at the top: it could be the architect, it could be the mayor who wants to promote the city, it could be a politician, more generally, anyone who has an interest in using architecture in that way.

I think this also connects to the commercial dimension of architecture, the fact that architecture always carries an economic dimension. And this is, as I mentioned at the beginning, one of the fundamental problems, at least as far as the sustainability of this kind of project is concerned: as I was saying, it is difficult to make it self-sufficient. You have to create a system that then becomes autonomous, that does not rely solely on grants or on funding, because funding can come with conditions, someone puts in money and wants something in return. Whereas if a municipality puts in money, those funds have a finite lifespan, they run out, and when they run out, so does the project. So how do you make this thing continue to function economically? That is the problem.

For example, if you build something that houses a commercial activity inside it, and perhaps the residents manage that activity, then they might also be able to sustain the costs, the donations, because it becomes a circuit, donations to *NYC Mesh*. Another question that people often ask when you present the project and they know nothing about it is: "Yes, but how much does it cost? Do I have to pay a monthly subscription to *NYC Mesh*?" Because *NYC Mesh* does actually live off this, it lives off donations. Some people donate a dollar, some donate a hundred dollars, but without donations it cannot continue. In fact, the *NYC Mesh* volunteers — who are volunteers — work incredibly hard; they do it out of a sense of community and passion. And even they, when you present the project, will tell you: "Look, there was a donation."

For example, as recipients of certain grants we were able to channel part of the funds directly into the project, and we also made a monthly donation to *NYC Mesh*. We said: "You are doing this project with us, we are doing this thing together — we are giving you some money, because with this money you can at least recover some of what you put into the work." We did not pay them in full, but we supported them. Just as they support us, we need to support them. And there is the exchange. It is not only a cultural exchange, there is also an exchange that sometimes becomes a material one, where I do something for you and you do something for me. Even, more simply, in economic terms: you help me do this, help me build this structure, and I make you a donation. Not that either of us comes out ahead financially, but there is a financial dimension to the project itself that has to be sustained. That is the project.