Designing the Open City. A mixed-use building in Portland’s Old Town neighborhood.

The studio will explore the role of architecture in shaping an open, diverse, and equitable city. Borrowing the term from Richard Sennett, an open city is one that “admits conflict and dissonance”, where growth is not understood as replacement or erasure but as a constant dialogue between old and new, a place where porous borders replace closed walls and the respectful coexistence with the other is the basis for a civic society.

We will work in the rich urban context of the Old Town / Chinatown neighborhood of Portland, the city’s original downtown district. Despite its history as an ‘Arrival City’, its ties to the economic development of Portland, and its rich architectural heritage, Old Town is a fragile environment. This fragility is visible in many ways, from the recent increase in crime and drug use, the exodus of long-established communities, and the closure of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these problems make the area vulnerable to forms of development that threaten its values and potential and could turn the area into a “closed city”. Our projects will align with an idea of urban growth that fosters inclusiveness, heterogeneity and multiplicity in the place of exclusion, homogeneity, and fixed narratives.

We will develop a medium-size building with a programmatic mix that fosters continuous use and exchange among various user groups, with a focus on street level civic spaces that bring together the housed and houseless populations and positively affect the urban realm beyond the structure’s footprint. The program will include cultural and community spaces and innovative housing options. Students will be able to choose between developing a new structure and intervening an existing building. To complement and enrich our work, will learn from non-profit organizations that cater to the houseless population and who see their own growth as integral to the development of the Old Town neighborhood, as well as from architects and planners working to improve lives and build social capital in fringe conditions and various crises around the world.

Stefan Gzyl is Director of Incursiones, a non-profit architecture practice working on public space, infrastructure, and education programs with vulnerable groups and impoverished communities. In Portland, Incursiones recently developed “Pandemic Response for the Homeless”, a research project funded by the Clinton Foundation to improve the living conditions of the houseless population during and post-COVID-19. Stefan is also Assistant Professor of Architectural Design at FAU/UCV in Caracas, Venezuela, where he has taught since 2011 and directed a design studio unit. He has been invited lecturer and reviewer at FIU, Pratt, Cal Poly, ESA-Paris, The Bartlett, among others. He currently lives in Portland.