Emerging from Dystopia: Latin America's Latest Lessons

If utopia adopts a complex and ambiguous position within what might be called the official domain of culture, then its situation is even more fluid and hard to grasp in terms of its everyday meaning. In this latter context, the term generally has a negative connotation.

—Franco Borsi, *Architecture and Utopia* (1997)[1]

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City planning is, and has always been, a fundamentally utopian project; an attempt to embody in single, comprehensive schemes, the myriad of cultural and social conditions deemed as ideal at very specific moments in history and sponsored by very particular communities. Architects and urban designers have traditionally employed all their skills and influence to envision and implement the plans to generate, contain, represent—and even control—these idyllic social, economic, political, and technological ideologies. From Plato's Republic to Costa's and Niemeyer's Brasilia, these optimistic manifestations of seamless societies and spatial arrangements have set the tone of urban planning aspirations.

The contemporary city, however, is rarely the product of a perfectly balanced system, but the constant and complex interaction of multiple and diverse structures. In fact, it is the innate struggle of forces in time that seems to create the diversity of conditions around the world's urban environments. Colin Rowe's *Collage City* recognized this situation three decades ago, conceptualizing the city as the historic superimposition of several models rather than of a timeless, unique utopian plan.[2] Many Latin American cities, as products of a colonization process and part of a historically poor, underdeveloped and conflicting region, are unique examples of these complex juxtapositions.

According to Anita Berrizbeitia and Romy Hecht Marchant, most cities in Latin America are the result of three distinctive yet interrelated processes: its physical geographies, colonization, and a partial modernization.[3] But recently, architectural and urban interventions in the region point to a fourth phase—one in which mechanisms differ from the last two in that it is not absorbed but emerges from within. Having to work within budgetary

constrains, city leaders, planners, and architects in the region adopted a different model than some of their American, Asian and European counterparts—which in the last fifteen years and following the *Bilbao effect*, decided to make major investments in projects aimed at creating new or renovated landmarks as marketing strategies for their cities. This model has now been highly criticized, especially in Spain, where huge investments in single projects were made in places like Valencia, Zaragoza, and Madrid. Many of these projects ended up causing major budgetary problems—in many cases not only because of the enormous budgets but also the inexperience of the public clients. As Llatzer Moix argues in his recent book, this '*miraculous architecture*' does not exist.[4]

As early as colonial times, when a systematic foundation of settlements proved to be a useful tool for royal expansion, most cities developed from the adaptation of an idealized grid established by the Laws of Indies. The compulsory geometry of a central square surrounded by buildings of the government and the church, having to adjust to unique topographies of coasts and mountains, gave way to very particular urban settings that distanced from the initial scheme. Even after their intricate foundation, cities in the new continent evolved through constant crisis. The new network of settlements was later "affected by the power struggles taking place away in European metropolitan centers [and] their influence on the colonies became temporarily diminished while those conflicts were being resolved."[5] So, as cities in the region developed, they adapted to their individual physical and political situations and evolved into different morphologies creating a large diversity of environments.

In time and with the globalization of economy, the influence of external markets and politics became a strong driving force behind most Latin American countries. Not so different from other so-called emerging zones, Central and South American cities were constantly shaped by alternating encounters between global and local forces and intense ideological debates among extreme liberal and socialist groups, who dominated the intellectual and political discussion. As a result, in Latin America "modernization, both as an economic and cultural condition, was asynchronic and uneven, not reaching all levels of society with the same consistency"—and parallel to it, modern architecture appeared in the urban landscape. [6]

Radical attempts for 'the greater good' show the authoritative approach that foreign and local planners had in mind for Latin American cities at the time. Designers, asked to confront pressing needs in a very short time, ended up imposing heavy-handed ideal plans—many of them deployed ineffectively and ultimately proving inconsistent with local values and cultures. From the 1930s to the 1970s modern architecture dominated the production in the region. Highly publicized projects like Jose Luis Sert's *Plan Piloto* for Havana, Cuba, which proposed the demolition of large areas of the city's historic center to be replaced by '*Hollywood-like*' reconstructions were proposed for various cities.[7] Housing projects exploring CIAM's planning strategies were constructed in several cities. Examples like *Unidad Vecinal* Number 3, Sert's other collaboration for the *Plan Piloto* project in Lima,

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Figure 1: Panoramic view of the *Praça dos Três Poderes* or Three Power Plaza, Brasilia, Brazil. (Photo courtesy of Rafael Bertola.)

Peru, became international landmarks. One of the largest projects to be built during this period was the massive *2 de Diciembre* complex. Including 85 superblocks and more than 9,000 units, it "fused master Modernist aesthetics with mass production and experimentation."[8] Now known as *Comunidad 23 de Enero* in remembrance of the day it was taken over by the distressed community, it represents the exclusionary practices of the time. Similarly, Lucio Costa's Brasilia, one of the most well known examples—imposed a formalist urban scheme on the Brazilian territory and is often considered a prime example of modernism's urban disappointment. In general, the imported modernist ideology was not always successful when imported to the new Latin American cities, where social fragmentation was, and still is, very visible and growing.

Under these unstable circumstances, cities in the region have become fragmented hard-to-manage spaces full of disparities, the most evident being the disparity among formal and informal settlements in urban centers. Informal urbanism is the physical result of a complex process of discrepancy between free economy models and weaker domestic markets that cause social inequities and that, in time, stimulate rural to urban migrations. In a sense, informal growth is the unwelcome by-product of a global, capitalist utopia. In Latin America, these socially complex environments, which often emerged from the needs and desires of the '*socially excluded*' to belong to the '*formal*' city, grew uncontrollably to become the clear testament of a region defined by fragmented societies. And so, as MacLeod and Ward explain it, the contemporary Latin American city "now constitutes an intensely uneven patchwork of utopian and dystopian spaces that are, to all intents and purposes, physically proximate but institutionally estranged."[9]

Today, after many attempts to control the landscape and the city with a top-down approach, a new generation of regional practitioners and academics are reacting against the policies that once tried to "render poverty invisible by eradicating informal settlements" through utopian projects.[10] Instead, these practices—many in the form of design collectives—are starting to work on local and alternative strategies to validate informality as a form of urbanism and question the notion of the ideal mastermind or master plan.[11] For these practitioners, the spontaneous '*slums*' where the '*others*' dwell are a priority. In fact, one of the significant arguments of this movement is its support for the reconnection of existing dystopian realities as a way to slowly materialize the future from the inside out. As such, most of their interventions are punctual, open, and casual; they are meant to grow and expand—not only physically but also socially. More importantly, they go beyond the idea of shelter and try to establish a flexible, almost self-regulating system that can adapt through change and time based on the complementary input from communities and authorities.

A NEW PARADIGM: [RE]CONNECTING, [RE]PROGRAMMING AND [RE]INSERTING

In Spanish, just like in English, the prefix '*re*' is used to add the meaning '*again*' or to indicate a backward motion. As a constant, new urban proposals for Latin America explore a backward way of looking at urbanism and

architecture: they don't visualize a complete new utopia but they re-envision a process based on current dystopias. In doing so, three main concepts guide most of the new interventions: re-connecting, re-programming, and re-inserting: re-connecting the social and urban fabric, re-programming abandoned spaces, and re-inserting people into the socio-economical system. These projects understand the already-made social and economical investment that slums and their territories represent and strive to transform them.

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[RE]CONNECTING

Tackling the problem of connectivity and trying to re-attach *shantytowns* and their dwellers to the rest of the social and urban system, connectivity and mobility projects at different scales have become essential for further implementation processes. At different scales and varying from the *Transmilenium* in Curitiba and the *Cantagalo* Elevator in Rio de Janeiro, to the bike lanes in Bogotá and the *Metrocable* and escalators in Medellín, access and alternative transportation projects become guiding networks for the insertion of new programs into previously overlooked areas. Followed by small, punctual urban interventions, multi-programmed architectural projects emerge from communal ambitions to become catalysts of change. The conceptual framework can be traced to what Jaime Lerner, an architect turned politician and who served three terms as Curitiba's major, referred to as '*urban acupuncture*'.[12]

An instigator of this movement, Jorge Mario Jauregui, argues that it is the physical intertwining between formal and informal developments that calls for the insertion of passages and connections to create urban continuity and fuse back the physical and social segregation. "It is necessary," Jauregui notes, "to give priority to aesthetico-ethical components."[13] Thus, his interventions for the *Favela-Barrio* program in Brazil remove physical and psychological barriers not only supplying essential infrastructure, but also creating a collection of public spaces that contain social infrastructures such as parks and schools. Rather than master-planning a whole area, Jauregui often achieves this by removing the least amount of *shacks*, retaking abandoned infrastructures and reorienting the chaotic urban fabric through social spaces. The final result is a system of organic public rooms, corridors, and structures that stimulate movement and interaction. Although small in size, the replicable nature of these projects has achieved great impact: with the support of the government, the *Favela-Barrio* initiative has reached more than 500,000 people in 168 marginal settlements.[14]

Jauregui's projects, which prioritize community engagement, are lead by a multidisciplinary team that includes civil, structural, transportation and environmental engineering, sociology, legislation, cultural, and communication consulting. The group visits the site several times and after developing a topological study of the area, guides the community through public hearings and meetings in which demands are not addressed directly, but interpreted and paralleled to the "inherent logics of the place and with the interests of the city as a whole."[15] Finally, once the principles for

Figure 2: Connectivity and mobility systems were part of the first steps in the emergence of new urban strategies in Latin America. Line K of the *Metrocable* in Medellín, Colombia. (Photo courtesy of Steven Dale.)

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Figure 3: Rambla Manguinhos, where a connective promenade connects other public spaces. (Photo courtesy of Jorge Mario Jauregui.)

Figure 4: Parque España as it seats on the hills. The three volumes contain three different programs: an auditorium, a library, and a community center all linked at the bottom floor. (Photo courtesy of Jose David Monterosa.)

the intervention are agreed upon, a *parti* is generated and the community involved as construction progresses. The process was recently applied in the design of the *Manguinhos* Complex, one of the most dangerous areas in Rio de Janeiro. The project, serving more than 50,000 people, promotes public spaces that perform as social articulators, attracting residents of all ages as well as the larger public from its surroundings. Special stress is put in providing spaces for children and teenagers to prevent them from joining drug-related activities. What is important to Jauregui is that these are the kind of projects that present historical opportunities to do something and to think in a way that privileges the quality of public life, aiming at a new relationship with the environment—one where the public realm becomes central in rearticulating the coexistence among differences.[16]

[RE] PROGRAMMING

Caracas' Urban Think Tank (U-TT) projects expand on Jauregui's ideas by understanding informality as an evolving process and acknowledging its multiple causes. U-TT's work is an example of the open-ended attitude of the designs that aim at re-connecting dysfunctional situations through multi-programmed, flexible interventions. It's founder, Alfredo Brillemburg, argues that, instead of generating a complete plan, his studio creates "a framework" that is then handed over to municipalities for re-adaptations and transformations from local communities. "We don't pretend to control the project up to the last screw"—he affirms.[17] The results are emerging hybrid-programmed constructions embedded in the un-planned fabric of the *barrios*: vertical gyms, music centers, daycares, and supermarkets mixed within the transportation hubs of the *Metrocable* appear dispersedly in the new landscape and transform an infrastructural project into an element of cultural communication. Far from being complete utopian and futuristic visions, U-TT's interventions are primarily political inquiries often involving many of the stakeholders in the process. "This is the paradoxical problem of today's designers—how to address contemporary crises with future-oriented solutions. But unlike the paradigms of last century's architects, we must not seek one solitary answer to our complex problems," adds Brillemburg.[18]

As an example, U-TT's Street Children Home project, uses a double-height *terrain-vague* underneath a highway—a land plot not designated as either public or private by Caracas' maps—to create an orphanage on the ground floor and a rooftop sports field on the in-between space. The project's flexibility allows for spaces to become either woodshops or open teaching rooms, converting the refuge into a trade school that stimulates and teaches entrepreneurship to the street vendors that previously seized the discarded space. In this sense, the project not only presents the opportunity to generate a much-needed facility, but also pushes social and economic development and questions land ownership and governmental involvement in urban matters, as well.

Along the same lines, another transformative Latin American project is the *Santo Domingo or Parque España Library* (2007) in Santo Domingo of Medellín, Colombia, by Giancarlo Mazzanti studio. Part of a larger-scale

urban acupuncture-type project called *Bibliored*, the building is one of twenty libraries introduced as new programs around the city and in the slum-filled hills. Envisioned as a mix-use space, the project holds an auditorium, a library, and a community center—all connected by a lower space that opens up to a public park in the lower floor. The three stone-like volumes that contain the programs have made a huge impact on the landscape, making its presence felt at different scales; from the city below, they appear as symbols of the previously forgotten community; to its adjacent surroundings, they became a center of community engagement and participation. Highly controversial because of its architecture, the success of the project should not only be measured by its formal and spatial characteristics, but by the impact it has had on the local community, which according to several authors, now speak proudly about their new library.[19] As an important result, projects built along the chaotic fabric together with the *Metrocable's* gondolas successfully brought "to the fore the existence of the shantytowns, with their disorderly fabric, as the unavoidable background of the planned city". [20]

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[RE]INSERTING

Alejandro Aravena's ELEMENTAL Studio, approaching problems with alternative solutions, also emerges from a critical position toward social and governmental institutions in the region, in this case Chile. Worried by the social housing situation, he questions the role and capability of the government as the sole provider of social good and experiments with '*unfinished*' modular buildings that involve owners in the units' upgrades and expansion. Following the ideas of PREVI—a pioneer yet not totally successful project in Peru that in 1968 invited architects such as Aldo van Eyck, Charles Correa, Christopher Alexander, Fumihiko Maki, James Sterling and Kisho Kurokawa among others, to propose housing units to reconcile the conflicting phenomenon of informal growth with more controlled planning strategies—Aravena proposed the *Incremental Housing* concept (Figure 5).

Rather than providing a more expensive state-provided, full-finished unit plus land model, it presents owners with an initial subsidy that covers land, infrastructure, and half of the housing unit, and asks them, in return, to in time invest in the house. Such is the case of *Quinta Monroy*, a 93-unit project in Iquique, Chile. In it, the low-income units are distributed in linear blocks defining public spaces that serve to increase security and social interaction. Modules of six meters deep and three meters wide make up the longitudinal volumes, where voids for future development are left between every other three-story stack. When entirely built, each unit will have a similar square footage than that of a middle-income residence, increasing the house value. Despite initial incredulity by residents, the success of the project built up confidence in ELEMENTAL who is now in charge of other low-income housing projects around the nation and worldwide.[21] In total, ELEMENTAL's proposal changes the utopian paradigms of finished buildings by looking at social housing "not as a social expense but as a social investment" where issues of design, such as scale and construction speed,

Figure 5: Owners working in the expansion of their houses in ELEMENTAL's Quinta Monroy in Iquique, Chile. (Photo courtesy of ELEMENTAL.)

Figure 6: After-condition in ELEMENTAL's Quinta Monroy in Iquique, Chile. (Photo courtesy of Cristobal Palma.)

are managed in ways that make the involvement of the community and its re-attachment to the labor force a part of the ethical-architectural project. [22]

DESIGN: [RE]EMERGING WITHIN DYSTOPIA AND EMERGING FROM UTOPIA

In current times, where resources are limited and the role of architects is being re-evaluated, it seems urgent to re-think the ways in which the profession can promote change. As of today, architects only contribute to 3% of the world's built environment, raising the question of how to contribute and influence the remaining 97%.[23] One of the situations that architects are currently struggling with is the tense intersection between a free and persistent capitalist market and different types of counter-balancing strategies. The disjunction between capitalism's utopia and some of its dystopian consequences has caused a myriad of twofold situations—for instance, the economic-bubble-driven construction of sustainable buildings in previously inhabited and clearly unsustainable territories.

As previously mentioned, interventions like the ones in Latin America are not unique to the region; in other parts of the world, architects and organizations are applying once again the power of working from the bottom-up. What makes the Latin American experience unique is that it is not an isolated project, but a general attitude—one that, as John Friedmann writes, understands utopian thinking as "the capacity to imagine a future that departs significantly from what we know to be a general condition in the present."[24] And so, similar urban implementations are taking place in major cities around the region including Medellín, Bogotá, Caracas, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and La Paz.

But if the Latin American example is about triggering a process of social change, then this is only the beginning; and as Felipe Hernández warns, "now that architecture has emerged as a visible indicator of the transformation that can be achieved in cities fairly quickly, it is only important to hold that position and to influence future development," because we can't "avoid responsibility by suggesting that the political, economic and social changes needed are beyond the reach of architecture."[25] As he suggests, continuous evaluation and influence over future governments pave the busy road ahead.

In conclusion, urban and architectural propositions recently emerging in Latin America carry at least three significant lessons. First, that as Oscar Niemeyer commented when asked about the criticism of Brasilia: "I tell my colleagues that, if they're upset by misery, they won't resolve it on the drawing boards."[26] And so, today more than ever before, we should not forget that the roles and responsibilities of the architect go well beyond the practice of architecture in the traditional sense; and that as the professionals responsible for the design of the built and natural environments, community engagement and activism are part of our endeavor. Second, that there are major opportunities beyond the regulating macro-politics that resemble the modernist utopian projects of the twentieth century and that to focus on smaller-scale interventions can sometimes produce faster and larger impacts, a much desired outcome under today's critical circumstances. As

ENDNOTES

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Samuel Mockbee, founder of Rural Studio noted, architects and students should be more concerned with the good effects of architecture rather than with good intentions.[27] And last, that differently from much of the last decade's architectural utopian production, there is a dormant potential within the concept of dystopia for the practice of architecture and as Marie Aquilino points out, "learning from extreme conditions in the developing world is a powerful source of creativity."[28] Consequently, as issues of resource scarcity, climate change, and social inequalities increase, architects are called to introduce new ways of thinking, practicing, and teaching to truly stimulate an urgently needed and drastic change not only inside, but most importantly, outside the profession. ◆

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