

## DESIGNING LATIN AMERICA. SPATIAL JUSTICE, SOCIAL HIERARCHY, AND DESIGN PRACTICES

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### DISEÑANDO AMÉRICA LATINA. JUSTICIA ESPACIAL, JERARQUÍA SOCIAL Y PRÁCTICAS DE DISEÑO.

#### RESUMEN:

Este ensayo es un intento de codificación de un discurso entre algunas experimentaciones de diseño y planificación urbano latinoamericanas de los 2000, cuyos lazos disciplinarios forjaron alianzas con estructuras emergentes de gobernanza urbana y cuyos medios y fines profesionales se alinearon implícitamente con narrativas urbanas postcoloniales. Al excavar las luchas de la descolonización alrededor de algunas ciudades latinoamericanas y las crecientes asimetrías entre la ciudad 'Letrada' e 'Iletrada' que resultaron, es posible revelar el papel central

que la arquitectura asumió como práctica incrustada y figura discursiva para el despliegue de nuevas estructuras de poder. En este sentido, estas reflexiones son un intento de definir la respuesta de la arquitectura a la persistente condición colonial en estados, ciudades y regiones de América Latina y el surgimiento de nuevas formas de diseño y de sus tecnologías de poder para contrarrestarlas en el contexto de la reafirmación del capitalismo neoliberal o de discursos neo-bolivarianos.

**KEYWORDS:** URBANISMO POSCOLONIAL, RESISTENCIA, BANDOLERISMO SOCIAL, CIUDAD LETRADA, PODER

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## Introduction

*Spatial Justice, Social Hierarchy, and Power Practices. Designing Latin America* is an attempt to codify a discourse concerning some Latin America's urban and planning design experimentations of the 2000s. These experimentations have disciplinary ties that forged alliances with emergent structures of urban governance, as well as professional means and ends implicitly aligned with postcolonial urban narratives. By excavating the struggles of decolonization around some Latin American cities, and the growing asymmetries between 'Lettered' and 'Unlettered' cities that resulted, it is possible to reveal the central role that architecture took on as both practice embedded in, and discursive cypher for the unfolding of new power structures. In this sense, these reflections are an attempt to define an architecture's response to the persistent colonial condition of states, cities and regions across Latin America. Moreover, they try to define the rise of new forms of design and its power technologies, which are meant to counter these latter in the context of the reaffirmation of neoliberal capitalism or neo-Bolivarian discourses.

This article assembles a narration with sets of projects, statements, narrations, events and figures, the whole of which constitutes less an 'alternative' history of architecture than a history of Latin American discursive and professional present. In addition, this is not a treatise of 'learning from', as one may assume from the scope of material I draw upon. Rather, it insists on the fact that in order to truly grasp what Latin American architecture has become today, we need to read it through a history of its discursive outlines, disciplinary territories, epistemological contours and technical practices that constitute an entangled 'political discourse'. Thus, far from peripheral or weird objects to be consumed by architectural critic's centripetal appetite for the exotic, this text identifies more of a methodological scope through which it is possible to examine how architecture discovered a political instrumentality in its entanglements with the informal, the peripheral, the banditish, and the 'legally exogenous'<sup>1</sup>. This discus-

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1 The reference is to how the concept of social banditry has haunted the Latin American imagination. As a cultural trope, banditry has always been an uneasy compromise between desire and anxiety, and it is possible to isolate three main

sion is located precisely at the interface between fear and the intrinsic potential embodied in 'unlettered' urban spaces, that is territories that are indeed a fertile ground for innovation. As social, economic and intellectual frontiers, they seem to be fragments, 'zones of exception', well suited for entrepreneurial endeavors and design experimentations. However, there is a caveat: if these threshold areas are ready for innovative appropriation, they can just as well be negatively conceived or appropriated. Therefore, it is not possible to be entirely optimistic, and it is necessary to remember that margins and borders are key sites where power may reassert its strength (by censoring the Otherness), and expands its reach (by filling juridical voids).

To tell this story, the text traces an arc *starting* from the invention of hybrid prototypes of multilayered public and semi-

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representational strategies. The first one concerns the bandit as radical other, a figure through which the elites depicted the threats posed to them by various sectors outside the lettered city. The second one involves the bandit as a trope used in elite internecine struggles, where rural insurgency was a means to legitimize or refute an opposing sector or faction within the lettered city. Finally, in certain cases, the bandit was used as an image of the non-state violence that the nation state had to suppress as a historical force and simultaneously exalt as a memory in order to achieve cultural coherence and actual sovereignty.

public spaces, *passing* through the rise of mobility infrastructures as devices for reduction of spatial fragmentation, and arriving to the experimentations of 'striated' urban spaces. Venezuela, Ecuador, Mexico and California are the main locations of this narration.

### *1. A fragmented theory*

This first set of reflections is concerned with the experimentation of innovative socio-spatial devices in the context of the Latin American city; a place marked by both class and ethnic fragmentation, and the presence of vast system of thresholds or interfaces articulating relationships between formality and informality, that is lower class suburban spaces, spaces of exception, fractures, social condensers and systems of enclaves along environmental or mobility infrastructures. These situations can be seen as a source of alternative values and visions of everyday life for most southern Americans. It is in the 'thresholds' between underdevelopment and over refinement that it is possible to look for innovative urbanism discourses. The hypothesis is that it is possible to look at these situations as fragmented spatial capital, as agents of transformation, and as a support and place of potentiality. These systems of thresholds, interfaces and fragments can be places of experimentation of urban mutation, seen as an

alteration after which the urban space might have changed its nature. The research question is: how is it possible to make these spaces democratic resources? New design narratives are at stake (di Campli 2016).

In the past two decades, a new generation of architects has emerged in Latin America, reinstating a sense of optimism to the idea that urban designers can, one more, make a significative difference in the city-making of the so-called global South.

In Venezuela, the Urban Think-Tank (U-TT), an office founded by Venezuelan Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klemperer, designed and realized in the *barrios* of Caracas what they defined as 'vertical gyms'. These are structures conceived as a progression of layers corresponding to a superposition of uses and functions, as well as a set of innovative urban devices designed to give an energizing effect in their communities. U-TT also designed cable-car systems located in hillside slums, hence connecting the informal city to the city centre and improving the mobility of Caracas slum dwellers. In Caracas, the architectural office Pico Estudio focuses on the definition of new urban environments and social infrastructures that allow establishing new methodologies of cooperation, fabrics of horizontal organizations, and forms of collective governance. In

Ecuador, 'Con Lo Que Hay' (With What is Available) is an academic architecture studio within the Faculty of Architecture of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, in Quito, for levels seven and eight as a pre-professional opportunity where students ultimately apply their academic knowledge along with social work within a specific community.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Medellín was the murder capital of Latin America. Here, a sequence of mayors, in particular Sergio Fajardo, realized new kinds of urban open spaces, civic equipments and infrastructures that help improving the city. However, it was the organization of the relationships between dwellers, actors and stakeholders to be more radical than the new buildings and public spaces per se.

Along the US-Mexico border, a different kind of urban designer is at work. Teddy Cruz has theorized the role of the activist architect, by marking a form of design-practice based in the engagement with the complicated business of policy.

Some specific elements characterize these experiences: the design strategies pointing out forms of urban transformation and densification focused on multiplication of uses, and the identification of innovative social interaction devices. This 'tangle' of different design strategies and experiences can be ordered in three main families, or threads, described in

this sequence: 'urban acupuncture', 'networks' and 'club sandwiches'.

### 1.1 The First Thread

In 2014 the Venezuelan firm PICO Estudio, in hand with the National Government of Venezuela, organized *Espacios de Paz* (EDP) (Spaces for Peace), an ambitious exercise in urban acupuncture and participative design where professionals, students, local residents and public entities worked together to benefit from their cities and people. This initiative activated urban processes of physical and social transformation through architecture, using self-building techniques in public spaces located in conflictive urban contexts. By transforming unused spaces such as empty plots and unregulated landfill areas, the projects sought to create social dynamics that invite new ways of living in communities, thus transforming categories that rule daily life: the use of time and space. The aim of this challenging project was to create social dynamics which invite new ways of living in communities, modifying categories that rule daily life, transforming vacant plots into powerful spaces for their inhabitants. These urban spaces were designed to both act as 'intermediary spaces' within areas where social exclusion is a dominant issue, and to promote a culture of peace and coexistence among the residents of the *barrio*. Consequently,

they could be imagined as 'zones of agreement': areas for positive encounters and enjoyment that generate other ways of coexisting. The strategy of *Espacios de Paz* consists of focusing on specific places that can both generate dialogue and start the generation and transformation of the habitat. An example of these kind of spaces is the one realised in Petare, one of the densest slums of Caracas. Here PICO Estudio transformed an informal building occupying a footprint of approximately 120 m<sup>2</sup> into a community space hosting multipurpose areas: a recording studio, a computer area, bathrooms, a kitchen and a rooftop basketball court. The design process tried to be flexible in order to accommodate future changes and uses.

(See Image 01 – p. 157)

In engaging with the Venezuelan informal city, the U-TT architectural design office developed a methodology to maximize the amount of functions and social activities that a single parcel of urban soil could give (Brillembourg and Klemperer 2011; Gehl 2013; Lerner 2015). In 2001, this strategy was tested on the Mama Margarita orphanage. U-TT designed a football pitch on the roof, gaining two productive stories out of a useless space. In the district of La Cruz in Caracas a building defined as a 'vertical gymnasium' has been realized<sup>2</sup>. This Ver-

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://u-tt.com/gimnasio-vertical-chacao/>

tical Gymnasium, constructed in 2003 at over 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>, consists of a fitness complex with basketball courts, a dance studio, a weight room, a running track, a rock-climbing wall and an open-air soccer field. The former training ground was located at street level, and due to the densely built surroundings, it could not expand outwards. The solution was therefore to build upwards.

(see Images 2 – p. 157 and 3 – p. 158)

In the Kichwa community of Santa Rita, Ecuador, 'Con Lo Que Hay' workshop from PUCE-FADA and the architecture studio 'ensusitioarq', designed the Cocoa Interpretation Center, locally known as The Cocoa Cabin. This is a space intended for the analysis, dissemination and understanding of local culture and traditions. Reasserting the principles of assessment and cultural understanding, 'Con Lo Que Hay' defined the main activities and the spaces the community wanted: spaces for hand crafts, for culinary activities and for the cocoa transformation processes. This shaped the project with three platforms: the access and welcoming deck where the community has the chance to show and produce their craft; the deck, consisting of an open fire where the culinary culture is discovered and tourists can make their own traditional local dishes, such as *chontacuro* or *carachamamaito*; and finally the cacao processes deck, which contains

a sample of drying, fermentation and roasting processes.

These three spaces are sheltered by a large natural roof that leaves a free agro-type space for the community to live together, to stay and play. This entire infrastructure is built on the principles of "what is available", that is, traditional local materials and local knowledge, ancestral technologies and knowledges.

(see Image 4 – p. 158)

## 1.2 The Second Thread

The *Caracas Metrocable* is the most significant urban legacy of the Hugo Chávez era. It is a gondola lift system integrated with the city's public transport network providing quick transportation for those who live in the slums located in Caracas' mountainous regions. The system was built as a tool for social reform, with stations set up to accommodate a variety of services such as daycares, libraries, police stations, markets and theatres. The Metro Cable car system has a length of 2.1 km and consists of a funicular system with a capacity of 8 passengers each. The total system capacity is estimated at about 1,200 people per hour in each direction. The Metro Cable Stations provide more than just transport: they are hubs for social services and other community activities. Though the five stations share a basic set of components

and designs, such as platform levels, wheelchair ramps, circulation patterns, material and structural elements, they differ in configuration and in the possibility of additional functions addressing other community needs.

(see Images 5 and 6 – p. 159)

### 1.3 *The Third Thread*

In the first two threads, experimentations on new social interaction devices, as well as urban densification strategies, are obtained by overlapping multiple uses and functions on the same space, working in section rather than in plan. The third thread relates to the so-called '*Club Sandwich Urbanism*' as developed by the Guatemalan architect Teddy Cruz. While in the acupuncture and network strategies the focus is on the section, here the core of the action is on the plan, on the horizontal articulation of the urban lot or parcel (Cruz 1999).

What Cruz has been investigating in the San Diego district of San Ysidro is a new model of participative micro-development, which, working with a local NGO called *Casa Familiar*, provides social services<sup>3</sup>. With *Casa Familiar* as the basis of the project, Cruz transformed two semi-abandoned plots of land into a dense program of low-cost housing and social equipments.

The strategy adopted by Cruz was

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://estudioteddycruz.com>

that the plots may be cut into slices, each one with a distinct zoning, able to host different housing typologies or public uses. One of the plots, defined by Cruz '*Living Rooms at the Border*', has been designed into several rows: one for small apartments, one for large family houses, one for live-works units for artists, and one for flexible units providing temporary accommodation for guests or relatives. According to Cruz, pressing so many uses and residential typologies into one land parcel made the spatial scheme innovative; nonetheless, it was the set of social relation that may be established between them to be even more interesting. What is innovative about this project is the different uses of the set of land. Cruz tried to define a new concept of urban density by abandoning the idea that it is something that can be measured in number of inhabitants per acre; in fact, it can be rather redefined in terms of social and economic exchanges per acre. What is missing, according to Cruz, is a focus on the design of the protocols of the interfaces between communities and spaces.

(see Images 7 and 8 - p. 160, and 9 - p. 161)

## 2. *A Theory of Fragments*

This second set of reflections offers some critiques on the design approaches

and techniques dealing with the urban transformation in informal contexts described in the previous chapter. It demonstrates that these approaches are largely located within the framework of the so-called 'postcolonial urban theory', that is a resistance discourse against cultural hegemony, aiming to define 'outlaw languages', progressive forms of bottom-up planning, and new analytical and social representation tools. In this discourse appears a 'banditish' figure of architect - as Eric Hobsbawm would say -, which, as the inventor of new social thresholds, spaces of resistance or of introverted urban devices, implicitly counteracts and reaffirms rooted colonial visions and conditions. A threshold is a particular kind of territory that, as Foucault suggested, is with no doubt a geographical notion, but first of all a juridico-political one, that is the area controlled by a certain kind of power (Foucault 1980). Design, in turn has to be political, constructed and negotiated.

In this sense, what is at stake is the necessity to go beyond the reaffirmation of resistance design attitudes centered on issues such as 'creativity' and 'resilience', in order to define a clearly alternative design discourse.

### 2.1 Architects as Social Bandits

In 1969, the distinguished British economic and social historian Eric Hobs-

bawm wrote a small, yet powerful book entitled *Bandits*. In this publication he talked about 'social bandits' as agents of resistance in rural societies<sup>4</sup> (Hobsbawm 1959; 1969).

The social bandit, according to Hobsbawm, was a noble robber, embodying the virtues of Robin Hood by robbing the rich and giving to the poor. Bandits expressed social protest among the peasants and were thus regarded as heroes, contrary to the view of the authorities who branded them as criminals. In certain cases social bandits could lead the way, and in that sense, form a part of rebellion or revolt, which is why Hobsbawm had originally cast them as primitive rebels (Hobsbawm 1959; 1969).

Bandits are described as figures of social protest and rebellion who positively figure in specific local communities and territories. They tend to operate at the borders of social strata, at times teetering precariously at both the edges of the communities and classes of which they are part of, as well as the power structures with which they must deal. The urban hegemonic cultural system normally considers these figures and their communities as belonging to rural territories, that are at the same time mysterious and dangerous.

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'social banditry', was first voiced in *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and later expanded on in *Bandits* (1969).

The construction of outlaw heroes implies a number of elements that operate together to provide a recurring framework that effectively sustains and reinforces itself. The hero is a usually a charismatic individual who is spurred into defiance by an often relatively minor incident. By making use of an existing narrative framework, within which a crude but often effective moral code is embedded, the celebrated outlaw, their sympathizers, and their oppressors appear to act out a cultural script with their roles pre-determined by the tradition. This script almost inevitably leads to a violent denouement. The dead hero, then, develops an afterlife that feeds back into the tradition keeping the legend alive and providing the basis for the heroization of the next individual to raise a sword, bow, or gun against an oppressive power.

Since Eric Hobsbawm's initial formulation, there has been a substantial literature about resistance processes in both rural and urbanized areas. Bandit-leaders and their working-class communities are traditionally viewed by the hegemonic system as agents of resistance to urbanism and urbanity, as elites define it (Turner 1975; Slatta 1987; Scott 1990; Segal 1990; Blok 2001; Seal 2011). Especially in the 1960s, when students and other protests were in the air, people appreciated and apparently identified with the

concept of social banditry, which legitimated crime in the name of justice. The cinematic resurrection in 1967 of Bonnie and Clyde, who robbed banks in the 1930s, seemed to resonate with students activists who were stoning and bombing banks in California. Social banditry was fashionable then, and it still is today to some extent.

Polarization has often characterized the field of social bandit and outlaw hero studies. Hobsbawm argued that the social bandit is a reality that motivates certain forms of political resistance to oppressive regimes within peasant societies. On the other hand, many historians and anthropologists argued, with detailed evidence from case studies of various peasant and other economies, that both "noble" or otherwise bandits do not subvert the status quo, but rather support it through networks of interdependence and collusion with ruling wealth and power elites<sup>5</sup>. Historians plying the ar-

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5 To some extent, the concept of social bandit is similar to that of organic intellectual as defined by Antonio Gramsci. According to Gramsci there are two kinds of intellectuals: organic intellectuals and traditional intellectuals. The former are structurally linked to particular social classes, and for this reason they are defined as 'organic'; they contribute to either the maintenance of the supremacy of an already dominant class, or to the emergence of a subaltern class, and their 'organicity' depends on how much they participate in the process of building the hegemony of a class (Gramsci 1975).

chives have found most of them to be pragmatic, opportunistic self-promoters who robbed their fellow peasants along with people with better means. Moreover, through observation, bandits became wily and established linkages not only with their village kin, but also with the powerful. At times, they had both strong political convictions and ambitions and aimed more at entering society than changing it (Block 1972).

According to Hobsbawm, these social bandits were the outputs of frictions between modernization processes and persistency of traditional forms of social and spatial production that had modified traditional peasant life-styles and visions. Hobsbawm found these bandits, often protected in their activities by their local communities, both pre-political and, under many aspects, ineffective and limited motors of social change. Still, he celebrated them.

## 2.2 *The Limits of Resilience*

It is possible to both build on and depart from Eric Hobsbawm's original formulations about banditry, by reconsidering the figure of the social bandit as a metaphor to highlight some attitudes characterizing the type of architect and urban planner involved in the definition of the strategies and design experiences presented in this text.

Central to the encouraging attitudes

expressed in these urban designs and planning experiences, is that Latin American urbanism seems currently to be able to innovate and reverse the 20<sup>th</sup> century trend, notwithstanding that its techniques, discourses and imaginaries were mostly borrowed from European or North American approaches, that is more generally, from the so-called Western Urban Theory. Nonetheless, concepts such as 'urban acupuncture', 'networks' or 'club-sandwiches' used to frame this 'Radical', 'Southern' or 'Insurgent'<sup>6</sup> urbanism (McFarlane 2008; Pieterse 2014; Schindler 2016), are characterized by some limitations, including the absence of a clear attention to traditional class antagonism. For example, urban acupuncture is traditionally presented as an approach aiming to stimulate the city's nervous system with tiny interventions that can have a catalytic effect on the 'organism' as a whole. This approach seems to place a lot of faith in specific solutions to the problems of slums, particularly those that improve transport links or that undo stigma, introducing, for example, iconic architectures in derelict areas. On the other hand, too little faith is placed in lower classes' ability to challenge existing social relations that produce these problems (Davis 2007).

<sup>6</sup> I consider these three terms as interchangeable even if the locution 'Southern Urbanism' seems to be more directly related to African contexts.

In urban planning strategies and discourses, the design attitudes expressed in the three main 'threads' discussed in this text can be considered as an expression of what can be described as a tactical approach to urban planning and design, aimed at addressing issues such as uncertainty, social inclusion, participation and design of evolutionary urban contexts. Explicitly, these design experiences are optimistic and radical; however, on a deeper level, they can be seen as pessimistic and conservative, considering that the actual characters of the Latin American city are in the end incontestable, and claiming, at the same time, that architects' main role is fundamentally to negotiate cities indisputably governed by a marriage between persistent colonial values and unchallengeable neoliberal interests and visions.

Here, two very popular and disputed concepts come to the fore simultaneously: creativity and resilience, ideas which even John Turner recalled when talking about Lima's *barriadas*<sup>7</sup> (Turner 1965;

1976; Mackrell, Turner et al. 1974; Turner, Turner 1988; Lobo 1982; Leeds 1994). Creativity and resilience, or better 'subaltern resilience' (Bracke 2016; Chandler, Coaffee 2017) are concepts easily converging and intermingling. They implicitly support the persistent colonial visions and attitudes still permeating Latin American cities and territories, rather than openly criticizing or challenging them, ultimately leaving Latin American urban dwellers with almost as little faith in the future. The situation may improve, but only modestly and incrementally, as it cannot be totally changed. Like its ideological twin of 'sustainable urbanism' before it, 'resilient cities' is proving to be extraordinarily seductive. The creative and resilient city can easily both withstand and rapidly bounce back from shocks and stresses getting back to the desired status quo of socio-spatial production, capital accumulation and elite wealth capture.

The insistent reinforcement of the cult of creativity and resilience has been criticized by many scholars, notably the English urban geographer Tom Slater (Slater 2014).

For Slater, resilience and creativity can be considered as policies and think-tanks that infect and paralyze both the study and the design of cities, which finally become having important research topics

<sup>7</sup> The PREVI project, realized in Lima in the late 1960s, is an example of the experimentation of the strategy of 'incrementalism' pointing out a third way between Modernism and Postmodernism. Latin America's incrementalism is bound to promote a process without definition (Open Form), which is defined with small actions encouraging social inclusion and citizen participation. The invention of incrementalism can be considered as the expression of a specific form of re-

sistance of Modernism in Latin America.

all over the world. According to Slater, the obsession on these two key concepts, under many aspects unjustifiably equates the effects of socio-spatial injustices and the effects of the capital, presenting both as something 'natural' and therefore indisputable<sup>8</sup>.

There is a long and successful history of concepts brought from biological sciences to social sciences, especially regarding the study of cities; 'urban regeneration' being the most successful recent example. In the case of resilience, poverty and socio-spatial fragmentations change smoothly from being socio-political creations to naturally occurring phenomena. As an analytic framework, resilience seems to carefully, and perhaps even judiciously, ignore important questions about the contradictions of modernity/coloniality or uneven urban developments. The dark side of urban resilience lies in the obvious, and to its proponents, in the entirely logical suggestion the word carries: lower class dwellers should brace themselves for scarcity of resources or environmental crisis, and in the end everything will improve.

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8 Urban vulnerability, adaptability and climate change are topics frequently related to the concept of resilience; concept intended as the operative frame where projects are able to enhance the understanding of and the response to natural, environmental, social, economic and technological shocks, as well as gradual changes.

In order to clarify these considerations, let's recall the worldwide celebrated Medellín's urban transformations. In this case it is useful to shift our attention from the civilized, post-pacification *façade* celebrated by media, to the 'cleaning' processes that preceded it. Under many respects, Medellín's true collective project does not correspond to the experimentation of the tropical 'social urbanism' symbolized by prestigious public buildings, and realized throughout the favelas. It rather corresponds to the violence that secured the city for capital investments before their construction. Central here are the old narco paramilitaries serving both as investors of capital in their own right, and more generally as murderous guarantors of security for capital. The collective project included the murderous sanitization of some peripheral districts in order to make them safe for urban redevelopments, with the narco-paramilitary leader Don Berna representing the "fusion of politics, property and organised crime...[which] largely determines the shape of the built environment" (Hylton 2006; 2007).

Moreover, the murderous side of the collective elite project was not restricted to social whitewashing; it also involved the murders of activists in the slums, destroyed militant community organizations "for housing, healthcare, education and better employment, making many of

the hillside neighbourhoods all but unlivable" (Hylton 2007).

This shows that there are actually two different forms of urban resilience which contradict each other.

The first resilience, as detailed by Tom Slater, is the neoliberal city facing capital accumulation. The second is the urban proletariat resilience, which can overflow the limitations the neoliberals want to impose on it, moving from supporting capitalism to challenging it. In Medellín, the response of capital was, quite consciously, to destroy the resilience of slum dwellers through murderous violence.

### 2.3 Design 'at the Edge of Chaos' (Beyond Subaltern Resilience)

As affirmed before, optimism and radicality go side by side with pessimistic and conservative attitudes, both implying that the traditional colonial characters of the Latin American city are, in the end, hard to dispute, and claiming that architects' main role is fundamentally to go into negotiation with rooted values and imaginaries.

In this sense, the present generation of radical architects really seems to behave as 'social bandits'. They are explicitly 'fighting' to improve the living conditions of lower classes, by refusing conventional (rational and omni-comprehensive) designs and planning approaches, and preferring to either adopt hit-and-

run tactics or to 'lay ambushes' focusing on small spatial interventions which often depend on the support of the local populations. Teddy Cruz's tactics of recycling and encroachment across the Tijuana-San Diego border; UT-T's invention of vertical gymnasiums; and Metrocables conceived as social condensers, are all an explicit expression of *guerrilla* discourse.

As social bandits, it appears to be an ancient rural astuteness in the inventions of their hybrid infrastructures, spatial layouts and physical devices, all of which are conceived according to an explicit *bricoleur* attitude consisting of searching around for usable bits and pieces that may be recycled and reassembled with other appropriate spare parts. The *bricoleur* invents, but mainly tries to find possible answers in what is already there, pondering what the objects can offer. Finally, the *bricoleur* does not bother so much about deep transformations of the conditions of the 'site of production', as they seem not to be particularly attached to a defined plan, ideality or theory.

'Acupunctures', 'Networks' and 'Club-Sandwiches' correspond to 'smart mechanisms' that do not seem to be able to define themselves as a whole well-structured and explicitly critical new urban theory, which is grounded on an antagonistic relationship with not only inherited urban knowledges, but also with

existing urban formations and processes. As a set of isolated actions they do not seem capable of calling dominant visions and power relations into question: they are incapable of formulating a 'plan' because of an obsession with the present. What these radical architects seem to get at, with this line of reasoning, is a conceptual short circuit where their hybrid and appeasing devices find their legitimation only when existing tormented socio-spatial processes and conditions persist. Though often implicitly, these smart mechanisms, whether in form of architectural objects, infrastructures or paradigms of settlements, function as devices for maintaining peace. In this sense, it is important to highlight that this is not a call for 'better bandits' as agents seeking alternative mechanisms: ultimately they serve the persistence of a dominant apparatus.

For these reasons, it is possible to affirm that there are surely severe limitations in the three radical design experiences presented in this text, for their substantial indifference to history and the abstraction from large social struggles. As a set of isolated enclaves, they do not seem capable of questioning dominant power relations, and are incapable of formulating a 'plan' because of an obsession with the present. Nonetheless, they are surely still valuable. The detailing of practical and astute ways in which resis-

tance 'enclaves' have been conceived and secured in different Latin American contexts, provides us with an innovative range of spatial solutions able to open up our imagination about what might be possible if the design of isolated fragments, devices and hybrids were re-framed in a more coherent and precise discourse<sup>9</sup> (Ungers 1982). What is at stake, then, is the reinforcement of a methodology of urban fragments, intended not as anomalies in a static body, but instead as a mode of generalization of a radical or insurgent planning theo-

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9 A reference in this sense might be the concept of *Grossform* as proposed by German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers. In the 1960s, Ungers tried to redefine the sense and meaning of architectural intervention at an intermediate scale between architecture and urbanism as a counter-measure to the urbanization processes taking place during those years in Europe. The formal coherence of *Grossform* (meaning literally "large form" in German) could provide a framework within which the unplannable processes of the contemporary city played out, while acting as stable markers of identity in an expanding urban field of increasing formlessness. Many of the ideas introduced in *Grossformen* would resurface throughout Ungers' career, and eventually find their way into the better known Green Archipelago project. But where the morphologically pure islands in the Green Archipelago form a 'dialectic city' as a federation of ideal fragments, the scale-less concept of *Grossform* equally suggests the possibility of the island itself becoming a 'dialectic object', containing the exacerbated differences of the archipelago.

ry<sup>10</sup>.

In this project, discourses and themes of the so called 'Postcolonial urban theory' are directly recalled. This is a construct traditionally inhabited by the post-modern concepts of the hybrid, palimpsest, *mestizo*, creole, swarm; of the 'fragment' intended as those elements of social life that cannot be easily assimilated into dominant discourses or struc-

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10 Talking about the relevance of the invention of socio-spatial innovation sites (such as urban acupuncture, cable cars, *favelas* or disaster recovery protocols) in a context characterized by the persistences of pre-hispanic modes concerning colonial grid structures and socio-spatial production within neoliberal economies, it is useful to note that it is not a matter of proposing a new *Latino* or *Mestizo* Urbanism. *Mestizo* is an abstract concept of 'mixedness' that celebrates the obliteration of difference in a democratic, non-hierarchical form. It holds up a generalized image in which racial, regional and even class differences are submerged into a common identification with mixedness. In many Latin American countries, the *mestizo* cult became allied to *indigenismo*, that is the glorification of the Indian, since the latter was to be integrated and '*mestizoised*'. Either way, these ideologies remain in the conceptual prison of racism as they still made reference to ingrained human differences. The point is, however, that they explicitly denied the assumed racial and cultural superiority of the European, while still projecting an image of *mestizo* homogeneity. This ideology can take on the appearance of pure rhetoric. Frequently, it is a part of a nationalist platform, propagated by political elites seeking to create a unified basis of support.

tures<sup>11</sup> (Yeoh 2001; Roy 2015; 2011; 2005; Said 1978, Chibber 2013).

The Postcolonial urban theory is basically a set of discourses aiming to define progressive forms of bottom-up planning. The questions traditionally addressed concern the analysis and representation of the city as a field of contention among different social groups; the ethnic and spatial polarization and fragmentation; the role of religious movements and traditional elites; the claims on the state; the politics of anticipation; the zones of exception; the transnational migrant practices; the self-reliance; and the user involvement in service provision. It is possible to describe these insurgent forms of postcolonial planning as 'even in the face of power' and in 'the interstices'.

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11 Brenda Yeoh, in her paper "Postcolonial Cities" (2001), analyses the postcolonial debate by locating the 'postcolonial' in the 'urban' and reflecting on three major aspects visible in the cities with colonial past: the struggle for identity, the encounters between the colonial and the postcolonial, and the conflict of Heritage. Ananya Roy, in her paper "Postcolonial Urbanism: Speed, Hysteria, Mass Dreams" (2011), suggests a shift from postcolonial as a urban phenomenon to postcolonial as a 'critical, deconstructive methodology' so that the authoritative and hegemonic understanding of colonized cities might be revisited, and voices of the subaltern groups can be brought to the debate. Ananya Roy illustrates her claims by deconstructing the 'worlding practices theory' through the examples of three Asian cities, namely Shenzhen, Dubai and Mumbai.

Postcolonial practices and theories of planning, output of massive global-economic processes taking place in various cultural backgrounds and contexts of the so called Global South, have surely multiple patterns of manifestation. However, what marks them is their explicit 'informality' and attention to the invention of 'narratives' where different visions and values clash. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars coming from non-Western countries have contributed to the Postcolonial debate and have defined the term transforming its original meaning. It is possible to say that this radical or insurgent planning is largely a 'slum-based' resistance discourse against all-embracing and comprehensive top-down urban interventions.

In this discourse, a strange relationship between the traditional western urban theory and the so called postcolonial urban theory appears (Edensor, Jayne 2012; Robinson 2006; Soja 2000). The traditional western urban theory is normally characterized by cartographic visions and top-down planning processes symbolized by the presence of specific conceptual devices, such as the public space intended as the main democratic element; the distinction between public and private spaces (i.e. intimacy and publicity); the rational large-scale infrastructure systems; the massive capital projects; and the liberal democratic governance and

'good governance' with lots of accountability mechanisms<sup>12</sup>. Both the traditional

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12 As colonialism (and more recently neo-colonialism) was practiced by western countries in the Americas, Africa and Asia, the western Urban Theory was widely adopted in Southern colonized countries. Produced in the context of highly urbanized cities such as London, Madrid, Paris and Amsterdam, the traditional urban theories were dominated by the urbanization experiences of Global North. Derived from this historical reason, traditionally planning legislation in colonized countries was simply following the western traditional urban theory for a long time. However, with the rapid expansion of urban scale and population growth in the globe, the traditional planning theory gradually became inappropriate for dealing with current urban issues, especially for Latin America. Postcolonial Urban Theory from the Global South, however, focuses on informality, indigenous movements, local control, traditional practices, insurgent and radical planning. Compared with the traditionally dominant western viewpoints (colonial power), this theory saw the problem from the perspective of the Global South (former colonial countries). Postcolonial urban theory tended to overturn and challenge the traditional dominance of western theory in planning and urbanism (for instance by applying participatory budgeting to avoid corruption and waste during planning process, and by acknowledging various informal settlements in law). A series of debates argued that by accompanying the shift from the colonialism theory to the postcolonial urban theory in the 20th century, the research priorities of the urban theory had already moved to the cities of the global South, such as Beijing, Cairo, Mumbai, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, etc. These cities are often described as mega-cities, places of abnormal urban developments with a mass of slums, terri-

western theory and the postcolonial urban theory place design practices and methodologies in the service of the “commons”, creating structures that channel the conditions of contemporaneity. At the same time, formality and informality, as well as northern structured visions and southern informalities in their normal interaction and conflicts, constitute a ‘complex adaptive system’ mutually reinforcing and legitimating each other’s discourses.

It is necessary to overpass this operative and conceptual deadlock. In this sense, the design experiences discussed in this text, under many aspects, constitute an attempt of innovation and a ‘challenge’ to the traditional Postcolonial urban theory. The three threads corresponding to ‘Urban Acupunctures’, ‘Networks’ and ‘Club-Sandwiches’ not only implicitly or explicitly draw on traditional Postcolonial inquiries and discourses, but also they are able to cope with those narratives integrating a largely analytical discourse which has an explicit design-oriented attitude characterized by the invention of innovative urban spatialities, devices of social interaction, and exchange of spatial production models. What is possible, then, is to innovate those processes of ascendance, emergence and contestation by defying the grid of postcolonial world-systems in or-

ble urban transportation, diseases and violence.

der to define a new paradigm or discourse that is not only an expression of a position of resistance or of a subaltern resilience<sup>13</sup>. Another route through the postcolonial theory is then possible by considering that postcolonialism is a concept that can be used not only to analyze and describe the ways a city is understood and represented, but also as a structured technique of planning and designing. Reconsidered in this way, the postcolonial urban theory not only articulates forces and affects eliding grips of colonization, but also may become an ‘aesthetic of intelligibility’ and a material articulation of innovative design visions.

Another route is then possible by considering that postcolonial urban theory is a complex and layered discourse that can be primarily used to analyze and describe the ways a city is understood and represented, though its range as a structured technique of planning and designing is less clear. In this sense, a different urban theory which does not simply articulate forces against the grips of colonization, but is conceived as a tool of ma-

13 The problem is not to highlight the difference between North and South. Under many aspects, the postcolonial theory is a way of inhabiting, rather than discarding, the epistemological problem posed by western-centrism. The postcolonial theory is then at the same time a way of interpreting and narrating the postcolony and the West, or rather the stories the West most often tells about itself.

terial articulation of innovative design visions, could be developed. A different aesthetic of intelligibility linking coherent and precise socio-spatial representations with structured planning visions is necessary.

From social banditry to politics, this is the challenge. The uncultivated, rough and 'slum-based' resistance discourse must evolve toward more complex design ecosystems and dynamics at the 'edge of chaos', where the status can be seen to be maximally unusual while still connected to that in the ordered regime, and thus is most likely to exhibit the combination of novelty and utility<sup>14</sup>.

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14 This particular phrase is here used to denote a transition space between order and disorder, regularity and randomness; a region of bounded instability that engenders a constant dynamic interplay between order and disorder. This point of interface between the two is hypothesized to be the locus for maximum complexity, as well as the dynamic driving design innovation as in these regimes, where network states are more disconnected from those in the ordered regime.



Image 1 - Pico Estudios. Espacios de Paz  
Source: <https://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl>

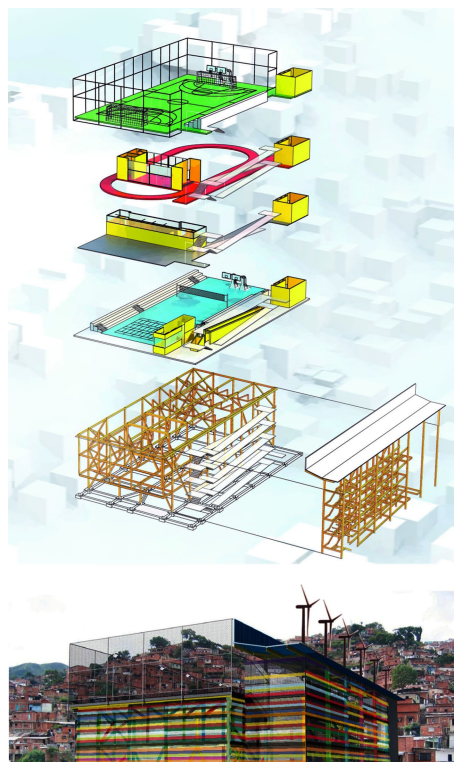


Image 2



Image 3 - UT-T. Vertical Gym.Construction

Source: [http://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen\\_Zumtobel\\_Group\\_Award\\_entschieden\\_4053827.html](http://www.baunetz.de/meldungen/Meldungen_Zumtobel_Group_Award_entschieden_4053827.html)



Image 4 - Con lo que hay. Cocoa Interpretation Center

Source: <https://www.archdaily.com/771456/cacao-interpretation-center-taller-con-lo-que-hay-4-plus-ensusitio-arquitectura>

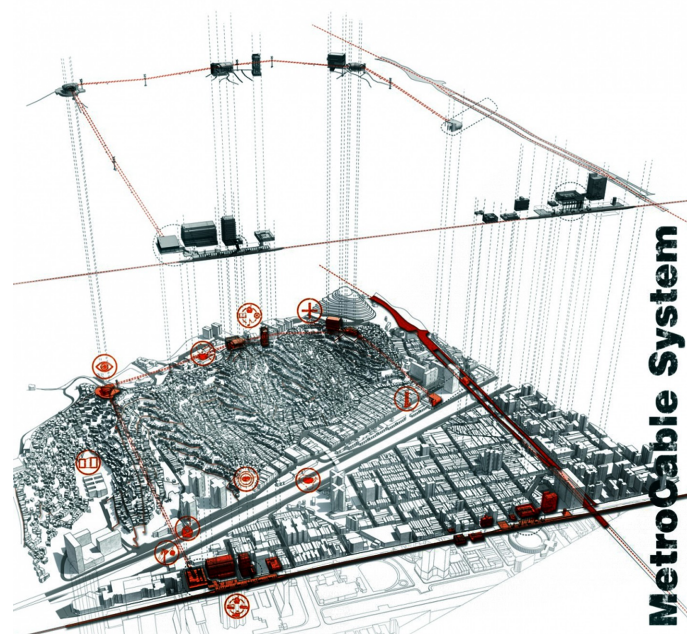


Image 5 - UT-T. The Caracas Metrocable. Layout

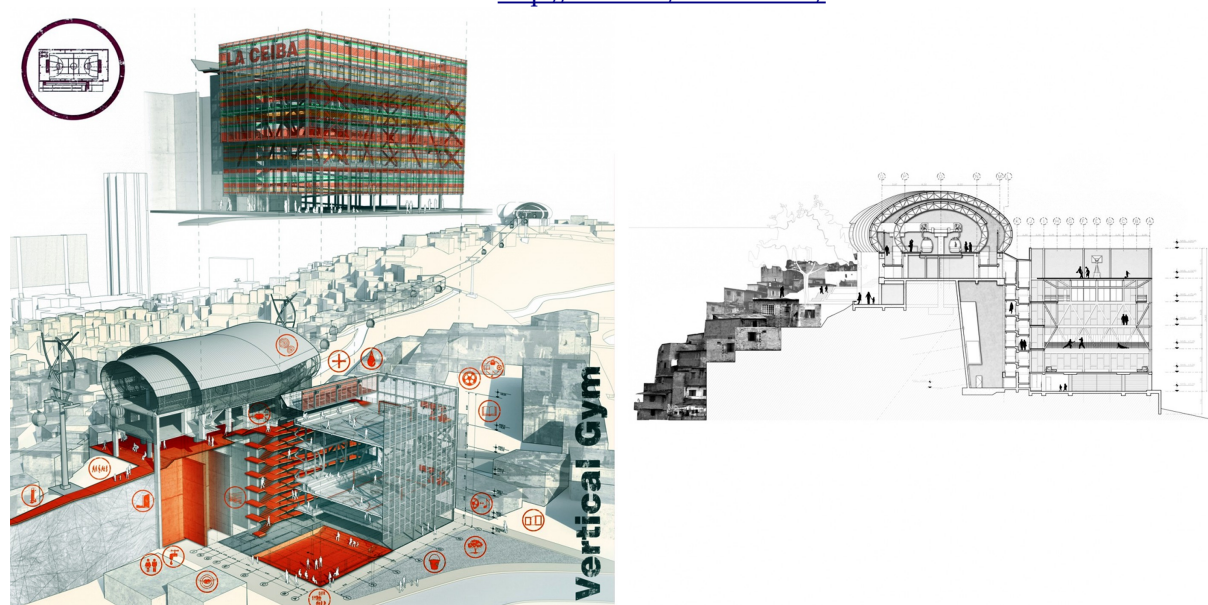
Source: <http://u-tt.com/metro-cable/>

Image 6 - UT-T. Metrocable. La Ceiba Station. Caracas

Source: <http://u-tt.com/metro-cable/>



Image 7 – Medellín. Metrocable (line K)

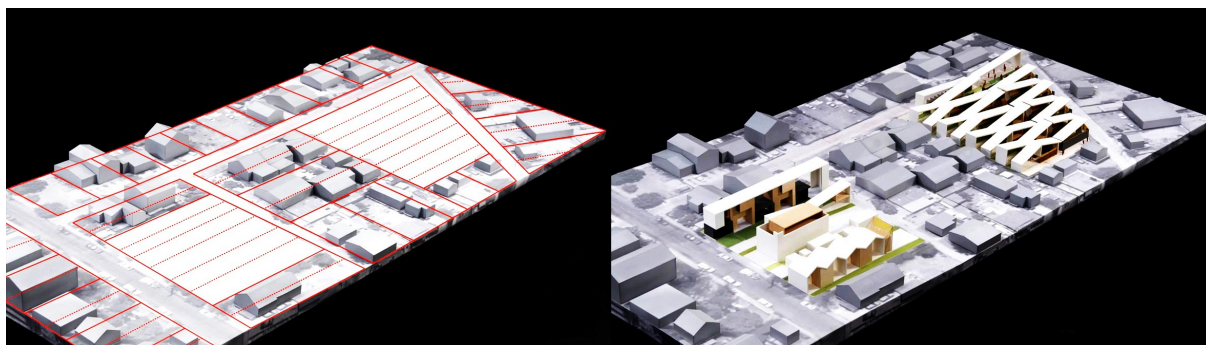


Image 8 - Teddy Cruz. San Ysidro, Casa Familiar. Living Rooms at the Border. Plan  
Source: <http://estudioteddycruz.com>



Image 9 - Teddy Cruz. Casa Familiar. San Ysidro, Living Rooms at the Border. Maquette  
Source: <http://estudioteddycruz.com>



Image 10 - Teddy Cruz. Casa Familiar. Living Rooms at the Border. Maquette  
Source: <http://estudioteddycruz.com>

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