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Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture by Justin McGuirk – review

Thinking about planning has changed: this is an intriguing study of 'urban acupuncture' and the informal city

By Alexandra Lange

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La Torre de David, an abandoned skyscraper in Caracas, is now home to squatters. Photograph: Iwan Baan/Urban-Think Tank

"Considering ideal conditions is a waste of time," Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner write in their 2005 book, *Informal City*. "The point is to avoid catastrophe." The two architects, partners in the international practice Urban-Think Tank, are known for the cable car system they designed for Caracas, connecting barrios in the hills with the city in the valley. Part of the allure of these cable cars, and U-TT's work in general, is the way they make a virtue of leftover spaces. A shelter for a football field becomes a "vertical gymnasium". A shelter for street children, built under an overpass, gets another football pitch on its roof. As design critic Justin McGuirk writes in *Radical Cities*, his survey of urban experiments in Latin America, in "engaging with the informal city, U-TT developed a methodology of maximising the amount of social activity that a tiny plot of land could deliver". They went small – "strategic" and "urban acupuncture" are the terms du jour – looking at what the city had become, and what individual neighbourhoods needed, rather than masterplanning a cycle of demolition and straight lines.

Urban-Think Tank's remark seems the obverse of another, more famous planner's words: "Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men's blood." That is Daniel Burnham, whose 1909 plan of Chicago depicted a set of grand boulevards radiating from a proposed lakeshore civic centre, with ring roads and parks at the city boundary. McGuirk reverses Burnham's emphasis, focusing on the in-between spaces in that dream of 20th-century city organisation. He chronicles the history of post-modernist development in cities across Latin America, setting up, again and again, a contrast between the planned and the made, top-down versus bottom-up, high versus low and, most important, centre

versus periphery. The strongest argument he makes, backed by examples in Bogotá, Caracas and Rio, is the importance of access to transportation. If modernist Latin American architects, often following in the footsteps of Le Corbusier's concrete blocks, saw housing as the way to democratise the city, 21st-century politicians and planners should be thinking about motion, with cable cars and bus rapid transit giving people in the slums more time and more opportunities.

McGuirk's mission statement, somewhat buried in a first chapter that begins in Mexico City, travels to Lima and namechecks both the "Bilbao effect" and Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city", is this: "Accepting the informal city as an unavoidable feature of the urban condition, and not as a city-in-waiting, is the key lesson that this generation of Latin American architecture can offer the world." Looking only at the big picture and bringing solutions from outside has failed to keep up with economic crisis and population growth. How can the old institutions, governments, banks, utilities and planners learn from conditions on the ground and prevent the violence, riots and mudslides that would count as catastrophe? A parallel project is under way in landscape architecture, where theorists such as Pierre Bélanger suggest that solutions for climate change will come from countries that have done less to their coastlines rather than more.

Many of the projects McGuirk describes will be familiar to readers of architecture magazines, frequenters of design biennales, and even visitors to New York's Museum of Modern Art, which featured a number of these projects in its 2010 exhibition *Small Scale, Big Change*. Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena's Quinta Monroy, a rare example of a successful housing project in the book, has proved to be catnip to the design press. The scheme is brilliantly simple: \$7,500, the government housing subsidy, was not enough to both acquire land and build a family a house. So Aravena designed a set of half-houses, cinder block with basic services installed. Each house was set adjacent to a vacant site of equal footprint. As families saved more money they could expand horizontally. McGuirk visited the first of these houses, built in 2003, and experienced "the mild taste of disappointment that comes from travelling thousands of miles to see something that is simply what it is – a handful of cheap houses, not the Pyramids".

Radical Cities is at its best when it offers a journalist's view of facts on the ground: real people, real observation, as opposed to the aestheticised drive-by of magazines and exhibitions. In these cases McGuirk is doing the work of the old-fashioned urban critic, describing and not relying on photography. I was particularly touched by a couple of living-room scenes, in very different settings. The first was in a house designed by Danish architect Knud Svenssons in Lima in the mid-1970s, as part of Previ, a rare example of a successful modernist housing development. Under a white, waffle-concrete ceiling, the homeowner has installed a baroque mirror, lace antimacassars and bilious green wallpaper.

McGuirk writes: "The house has three patios – three! – each looking on to a walled courtyard, making it bright and yet private. She feels privileged to live here, she says." Previ also boasts houses by James Stirling, Aldo van Eyck and Fumihiko Maki, making it a laboratory of late-modernist ideas about housing, privacy and replicability. Previ succeeds, McGuirk writes, because the houses were conceived as frameworks for expansion. The courtyards could be roofed over to make more bedrooms. No one told the homeowner she couldn't have a brutalist ceiling *and* a chandelier.

The second example is from La Torre de David, an abandoned skyscraper in the centre of Caracas that has slowly been inhabited by a highly organised set of squatters; it featured in the TV series *Homeland*. McGuirk and U-TT organised an award-winning exhibition about the tower, with photographs by Iwan

Baan, for the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale. I always had doubts about its presentation there: it seems obvious that living on the 28th floor of a building without elevators and without walls is closer to catastrophe than utopia. Indeed, Venezuelan architects criticised it as such in 2012. McGuirk discusses their critique of the Tower of David by arguing for it as a "paradigm of human ingenuity, adaptability and resourcefulness – of citizens exercising their right to the city". Even with the emphasis on the social over the architectural (a fine distinction in the context of an architecture biennial), I did not find McGuirk's admiration entirely convincing. Here's his description of life on the tower's top occupied floor, the 28th. Once you get up there, you don't go down that often. "With kids in tow, it wouldn't be a surprise if his family had simply given up the street altogether. A sort of Swiss Family Robinson, castaways in mid-air, the children only discovering the street when they come of age." This is a different, but no less utopian, vision.

Even after reading *Radical Cities*, I had similar questions about those cable cars to the slums: we see that they bring new civitas and new opportunity, but we don't hear much about the living conditions around them. McGuirk's city-hopping doesn't always give him, or the reader, the means to evaluate these interventions. Just as every modernist housing block is not Pruitt-Igoe in St Louis, Missouri – demolished after years of neglect in 1972 – some urban acupuncture fails, or merely looks good in an exhibition. More counterexamples would have created a better set of criteria for evaluation. In addition, many reforms seem to be just as connected to compelling personalities, whether in politics or design, as they were in the last century. (And where are the women? Milagro Sala, founder of the revolutionary Argentinian group Tupac Amaru, is the only woman interviewed at length.)

Yet patterns do persist. Perhaps you can see the radical city as a set of waves, infiltrating, rather than washing over or cutting through, a la Burnham, what exists today. The first wave is transportation, then public space and public buildings, and, finally, housing. McGuirk does a service by collecting and connecting these ideas, making a movement out of pieces, and showing an alternative way to shape the city.

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