"The social revolution," wrote Karl Marx, "cannot take its poetry from the past, but only from the future." Anyone interested in architecture and discontented with an ultra-capitalist present must find that poetry difficult to conjure, in a situation where "futuristic" usually entails computer-aided billowing-and-swooping "centres" for despots. More often, solace is found in the social modernism of the recent past, so near in time and so apparently distant in possibility. What is important about Justin McGuirk's Radical Cities – Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture, is that here radicalism is not retrospective, but living. Teeming, even.

In fact, McGuirk begins by endorsing the familiar narrative in which state-sponsored modernist projects were a top-down "failure". In the Latin American context, he notes, giant superblock Villes Radieuses, usually built by right-leaning military dictatorships, were followed in the 1970s by a sharp withdrawal of government involvement in housing across the continent, as it lurched towards neoliberalism. The "pink tide" of left-wing governments elected since the late 1990s have had to base their social programmes on cities defined by the self-built favelas that filled the gap. Rather than replacing the slums, McGuirk's radical architects have tried to work within them – an "activist pragmatism" he endorses, and finds almost everywhere in a journey across the continent, with chapters on Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia and finally, the Mexico-US border, where he imagines the lessons learned from "informality" being applied in the rich world.
This approach is fraught with dangers. Rem Koolhaas' attempt to "Learn from Lagos", for instance, was accused by local experts of overlooking the politicised misery and historical avoidability of that city's unplanned conglomeration of slums in favour of an aestheticised gaze where everything is always "super-interesting". McGuirk largely avoids this sort of glibness through the sheer specificity of the places he finds in his travels. In the least informal of the examples, in northern Argentina, the Tupac Amaru organisation has favoured a "radical socialist Disney urbanism" of rhetorical images, giant communal swimming pools, model dinosaurs and brightly coloured suburban houses, using direct labour and state subsidy. Elsewhere, he finds cable cars descending the hillside slums of Caracas and Rio, escalators doing the same in Medellin, libraries, piazzas or "vertical gyms" being built in the interstices of self-built housing, and mimes as traffic cops. The adaptability, self-activity and "sense of ownership and community spirit" of the favelas, and their often central locations, are contrasted unfavourably with the peripheral social housing being built in contemporary Brazil. The approach is social structures first, physical buildings second.

It's pungent stuff, well argued, full of interviews and anecdotes, full of admiration at the ability of ordinary people to seize control over their city. Yet the format of the travelogue, where encounters and experiences always come first, means that McGuirk seldom engages with the critiques of the various mayors, architects and projects he encounters, and context can be sketchy. The romanticisation of emergency is always a risk, particularly in the case of the alleged utopia of the Torre David, the celebrated/notorious squatted skyscraper in Caracas.

McGuirk does crack a little in a tense interview with the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, whose firm Elemental design half-built houses for self-builders to finish off, to the applause of European architecture magazines. One of Elemental's projects is too complete for the architect's taste, he discovers, too solid to be suitable for adaptation by its residents. Looking at the big, decent houses, McGuirk wonders "do the residents really want room to expand, or do they want an easy life?" Or rather, would people really choose to build their own houses out of whatever they have to hand, if they have the option of something decent, cheap and well-made?

That's the usually unanswered question that plagues Radical Cities. Informality becomes a fait accompli, the inevitable consequence of rapid urbanisation, but many times – in Eastern Europe in the 60s, in South Korea in the 90s, in China today – cities have managed to cope more or less successfully with exactly the same problem by building in vast quantities the very mass housing that "failed" Mexicans or Venezuelans in the 70s. There is no need for favela escalators when you can build Metros or tram networks. In the process, maybe that adaptability, community and solidarity that are so valuable in the informal city get lost. We don't get to find out whether they might coexist with space, parks, amenities, paved streets, lifts and sewers. That's why Radical Cities, for all its enthusiasm and optimism, is really about coping with emergency, not imagining possibility. That makes it a fine book about ingenuity, imagination and solidarity, but potentially bad counsel for the future of public housing and public architecture.
The gondolas Inclusión and Libertad in Caracas. IMAGE Michael Hudler

Urban-Think Tank’s first vertical gym in La Cruz, Caracas. IMAGE Iwan Baan
Row houses in Alto Comedero, Jujuy, Argentina. IMAGE Tomás García Puente

Guardians of the pool in Alto Comedero, Jujuy IMAGE Tomás García Puente
Elemental’s houses in Quinta Monroy, Iquique, Chile. IMAGE Cristóbal Palma

The Quinta Monroy houses after the residents’ expansions IMAGE Cristóbal Palma
The new rail line and the demolition at Manguinhos, Rio, Brazil. IMAGE Thelma Vilas Boas

Affonso Reidy’s Pedregulho housing in Rio, designed in 1947. IMAGE Tuca Vieira
The cable car in the Complexo do Alemão, Rio. IMAGE Tuca Vieira

Torre David in Caracas, Venezuela. IMAGE Iwan Baan
The Torre’s open atrium. IMAGE Iwan Baan

The España Library-Park, designed by Giancarlo Mazzanti, in the Santo Domingo barrio of Medellín, Dominican Republic
IMAGE Iwan Baan
The Orquideorama, designed by Plan B and JPRCR, Medellín. IMAGE Iwan Baan

The escalator in Comuna 13, Medellín. IMAGE Iwan Baan

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