

Cities in transition

Andres Lepik and Marjetica Potrč

In August 2012 in Berlin, on the occasion of the Nationalgalerie's *Architektonika* exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof, the artist Marjetica Potrč and the architectural historian and curator Andres Lepik held a discussion about the future of the city. The starting points for the conversation were Potrč's contribution to the exhibition, *Caracas: Growing Houses* (2012), as well as an exhibition that Lepik curated, *Small Scale, Big Change. New Architectures of Social Engagement* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010), and a publication that he edited, *Moderators of Change. Architecture That Helps* (Ostfildern, 2011). They talked about modernistic city planning and its social consequences, as well as about future models of artistic and architectural intervention in the urban space.

Andres Lepik: Modern architecture has been a driving force regarding the development of our built environment in the twentieth century and is still shaping many cities in the developing countries. What is your idea about the future of the city?

Marjetica Potrč: Modernism was organized top down. This was a time when people were seeking universal solutions, and now is a time when we are beginning to act on the local. Modernism dwelt in the idea of the individual, individualism, the dream of the anonymous individual in a metropolis. But what we are talking about now is a city made of communities, and this sounds scary, 'community' is a scary word to many.

AL: Why is the word scary?

MP: A month ago I had a conversation with Richard Sennett in London,[1] and I talked about communities in a positive way. Why? Because I see the potential in communities to change the city from below. Richard Sennett stressed the scary, uncomfortable side of communities – he talked about gated communities. It's true, we are now beyond modern paradigm, which aimed at social equality. Today, the two fastest growing urban forms are gated communities and informal cities – both of these phenomena are organisms that have little to do with wide open public spaces. The informal city thrives on community space, and the gated community is about private space. Sennett talked about the importance of having spaces of encounters in times when the world community is shrinking into parts, and I mentioned the idea of the 'agora'. The agora used to be a space of gathering, of encounters, and only later it became a space of commerce. This is precisely the kind of space we lack today. We desire the ancient agora, a space where you are with others who are different from you and yours, where you talk about common issues that are larger than your own group.

AL: A majority of us now live in these cities that are based in many parts on a modernist idea of separation of functions. But how do we get this back to what you describe about community-based structures? Could you give us an example of public spaces that work for you?

MP: Sure. A perfect example is a project I co-organised in Amsterdam in 2009. [2]The Stedelijk Museum invited me to work in New West, a part of the city that

was undergoing dramatic redevelopment. This was originally a beautiful modern garden city conceived by Cornelis van Eesteren before the Second World War, but today it faces the usual set of problems of modernist neighbourhoods – immigrants who are not well integrated, high unemployment, and so on. Perhaps most striking was the empty public space. We walked down the street and there was no one around; no one was using the public space. At the same time, we knew that the residents came from Turkey, Suriname, and other places where people like to spend a lot of time outside, on the street, so to speak. But they were invisible. We created a community space in a fenced-off public garden and suddenly this space of encounters worked very well. The community garden and community kitchen, which ended up being the project, actually made the area safer.

AL: Something similar happened here in Berlin with the *Prinzessinnengärten*.^[3] This was formerly an empty building lot used as a place for drug trafficking. But a community garden as a private initiative helped to change this completely. Do you think a singular intervention can change neighbourhoods or is there a long-term strategy that has to follow?

MP: It has to be a long-term strategy. Working together with residents, artists can create a project, what I call a 'relational object'. It's important that the residents participate right from the start – this makes it possible for them to take the project over when the artists leave and make it live on. It can be a community garden, a dry toilet in a city like Caracas, or whatever.^[4] The relational object becomes a tool to change the culture of living, and for me, this is one of the most urgent tasks today. Just take your example: *Prinzessinnengärten* is only one of the community gardens, which are so popular today in Europe and North America. That's fantastic, no? They're not organized from above. People just want to do this. Community gardens are community spaces, and for those who are involved with the gardening they are spaces of ritual as well. Why would you, as a city dweller, suddenly want to get your hands dirty with planting potatoes and working together? You're performing a rite of transition; you are working to make a different kind of city. But make a note: community gardens are not the Schrebergärten, the traditional allotments people are familiar with in Germany.

AL: The Schrebergarten is an escape fantasy for the modernist housing but then the people who live in small apartments have again their little parcel with a fence around. The community garden is an open field, comparable to the one on the *Tempelhofer Feld*, a former airplane field in Berlin.^[5] People come together and cultivate a little piece of land, but they do it all together, there is this self-organization, which is taking more responsibility.

MP: Allotments and community gardens do have something in common, however. They tell us that the city is undergoing profound change. The Schrebergärten took root during the emerging industrial city. Similarly, the success of community gardens is a sign that our cities are in transition – now from a city of production to a city produced by residents. New values are being born. Instead of going shopping, you cultivate land, and you cultivate land together with others in the middle of your own neighbourhood. And this is where they differ: the Schrebergärten are located in an unused, dysfunctional space in a functional city. Each garden belongs to a single family. A community garden is

located smack in the middle of the neighbourhood and is cultivated by the community.

AL: Right: You start with the community garden but you might end up with different results of the project. To take your project in Caracas as an example, what was the impact on the community in the end? Did you follow that up?

MP: It's really about changing the culture of living. Projects like the community garden in Amsterdam and the dry toilet in Caracas's informal city address a particular problem and propose an outside-the-box solution. Community gardens, for instance, are not only about cultivating land, they are a political schoolroom as well. By being involved in the project, you learn your rights, you learn the rights of a citizen. You locate yourself in the process of reclaiming your city. That's one thing. The other thing is that projects produced in stressed environments – Amsterdam's New West and the La Vega barrio in Caracas are considered places in crisis – have something to tell others, the larger society. It's never just about solving your own problem. For instance, the lack of water affects the whole of Caracas. It's not only about one family living on top of La Vega hill with no access to running water. The dry toilet matters for the whole city, both informal and formal. For me, it's important that a couple of dry toilets have been built in the formal city of Caracas by construction workers from La Vega. It's about dealing with and living with water in a new way. When you see a dry toilet, you think about water. When you use it, you have to change your behaviour; it's a change in your personal life. That's a real challenge.

AL: This educational aspect is interesting. It's not about showing a finished object and having people learn afterwards. Rather, people learn through the process and you believe in the capacity of understanding. Basically you're very optimistic about human beings, right?

MP: We have to believe in humanity. That's the beauty of living, no? I often get asked: 'How do you define your role as an artist?' That's easy: I'm a mediator. Your book has a similar title, no? I talk about artists as mediators and you talk about architects as moderators of change.

AL: The title is: *Moderators of Change*.^[6] I think that architects should become more like moderators of change. They have the expertise and design, but lack the knowledge of the problems on site. So they first have to learn about the problems and then they can react to these problems with their designs. To interact with the community in terms of really allowing them to participate in the design. This problem interests me. Most artists and architects act like top-down designers, top-down decision-makers, with the community being asked only at the last moment – and then sometimes refuses to accept. If you start with the process very early and include the community, then the citizens will have proposals. Even when they don't get through with them, they still have the feeling of being involved in the process of decision-making.

MP: I often talk about participation, and I realize that the word 'participation' is much overused these days. Participatory design is where I see my practice situated. Lately, there has been a lot of talk about participatory democracy. Why do we use this modifier with these words? Because we lack participation. Similarly, the word 'sustainability' has been overused to the point that its

meaning is nearly lost. But even so, sustainability is crucial for the survival of our cities, so we need to rediscover what it means.

AL: How would you describe participation for your work. What does it mean?

MP: I'm a hands-on person. You have to get your hands dirty. You don't change much if you just talk. Doing things brings change. This is where the relational object comes in: it is this 'something' that people engage with, and it produces social change. That's how I understand it.

AL: In the architectural field I would describe different levels of participation. There's this kind of fake participation where the city planner gives two options to a community: either A or B. Participation for me means listening to the community first, before starting a plan at all. The second step is involving the community in the design process. And the third step is involving the communities in the construction process. The last level is giving over responsibility to the community. At this point the architect or artist has to step back and say: Now I'm out of it. This is my rather optimistic vision of how participation can work. It takes a lot of energy and time and that's exactly why many developers and politicians avoid participatory planning in the deeper sense of the definition. Politicians in democratic countries think about election terms. If they start a building project they want to cut the ribbon before the next elections.

MP: In 2006, I was in Amazonia in Acre, a very special Brazilian state that borders Peru and Bolivia.[7] The government didn't follow neoliberal policies – it was opposed to the over-exploitation of the forest. The land was distributed to local communities living in the forest. These territories are called extraction reserves, which are self-managed and sustainable. One of the government officials told me: 'If people survive in the forest, the forest will survive as well'. The same can be said of cities: If people survive in the cities, the city will survive as well. During the last century, modernism created the idea that architecture is the most important thing. But in Acre, there was not much architecture to look at. Instead, the social architecture became visible. This was a beautiful experience. Today, if I ask myself what comes first, the chicken or the egg, the city or the citizens, I say it's the citizens. We have to listen to the citizens when they want to transform their city, when they want to own their city. *Prinzessinnengärten* is telling us something. On a practical level, cities need more engaged residents at a time when the social state is receding. – Do you think that the projects you describe in your book can also be called relational objects? Clearly, they are much more than a form.

AL: They start from process and they address these social questions, but then they keep aesthetic quality as a goal. In these underserved communities, like in the informal settlements in Caracas or in the townships in Africa, if you show people a building that is functional *and* beautiful they know the difference from a simply functional building. They see what beauty is and they are proud of it, if it's happening in their community. Aesthetic quality is an important value to a social project that shouldn't be forgotten. But architects focus not only on design. They bring in the meta-level of planning beyond individual buildings that is often missing. People move in large numbers into these informal settlements but they don't form public space, they just form their own houses. That's a big problem in many of the slums in India and Africa. There is no open place where people can

meet. And that's again about the social values of the city. It needs public spaces, that's very important.

MP: Usually, the difference between the formal and the informal city is described in terms of the different architectures. Instead, I would suggest that the difference lies in two different cultures. Culture produces architecture, not the other way around. Caracas's urban culture has produced the modernist city. The rural culture has produced the informal city. The interesting thing is that the construction workers from the barrios are the same people who built the modern city, so they could have translated this knowledge into their own informal city if they had wanted to. But they didn't. They rejected it. They continued to build things their own way, no doubt because rural architecture produces village communities and not a city of anonymous individuals. Now for me, it was really interesting that the residents of New West in Amsterdam and the residents of the La Vega barrio in Caracas identified more with a shared or community space than with the public space. They saw the future of their city in small, strong neighbourhoods. No one talked about the metropolis. Forget about it. The metropolis was a dream of the twentieth century. For them, it was left behind.

AL: The informal settlements worldwide grow much faster at this moment than the formal settlements. Two billion people are living in self-constructed shacks, and due to political conflicts and many other reasons these numbers are rising. I was amazed to find out that you also worked with *Rural Studio*, [8] a programme in which architecture students are trained to design and build in teams for underserved communities in a very poor neighbourhood in Alabama. For me it's very important that the architects during their studies already get some idea of the social relevance of their profession.

MP: I was very inspired by *Rural Studio*. Especially by the projects initiated by its founder Samuel Mockbee (1944-2001). He had an unusual, groundbreaking vision for the time.

AL: Yes, but *Rural Studio* has changed a lot in time. Mockbee was really working project by project, and Andrew Freear is trying to build up a sort of system. Not only to realise exemplary projects, but to think about the wider implications of this idea for low income households in general. He wants to make people aware that you can build a house for 20.000 \$ almost by yourself that has a good design. The same is happening in Germany with Van Bo Le-Mentzel's *Hartz IV Möbel*, this social design furniture.[9] That's a good start.

MP: Another example is the idea of the *Growing House*, where residents become partners in the production of the city. In the first half of the twentieth century in the modernist movement there was an opening, a different approach to the mainstream modern city that we know today. Yona Friedman and Jože Plečnik, for example: they distanced themselves from the production of social housing where the city provides everything – the housing and the infrastructure. Yona Friedman proposed housing for India in which the government would construct a framework and people would then build their own living spaces inside the framework. In the 1940s, Plečnik drafted a project for Ljubljana which he called *A Common Roof*; the idea was that the city would build a roof and provide the infrastructure for a neighbourhood and residents, then, would build their own houses, each one different, beneath the common roof. South Africa had a similar idea after apartheid, when there was an immense influx of settlers into the cities.

A roof and the essential infrastructure were provided to individual families, and the residents built the houses themselves. Another example from South Africa is the 'core unit'. The city provides service core units – utility systems for drinking water, energy, and sewage – and the residents build their own homes. They are collaborators and not just receivers. This model may well be successful for the future.

AL: I think it will. And it has a longer history. In 1932 Martin Wagner organized an exhibition in Berlin. It was about the *Growing House*.^[10] A lot of architects like Walter Gropius, Erich Mendelsohn, Max and Bruno Taut were engaged in projects for incremental housing. But this all came soon to an end when the Nazis took power. Only the politicisation of architecture in the 1960s led to a renewed interest in this question. There was this *PREVI* housing project in Lima in Peru, where James Stirling and others were invited. A military putsch stopped this programme, only 500 houses were built, but they're still there.

MP: You talk about Latin America. I was truly inspired by Antanas Mockus, who initiated major social changes in Bogotá, Colombia, when he was the city's mayor. He turned to unconventional ideas to improve the situation; when he took office, Bogotá was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world and had the highest number of kidnappings. He changed the city by speaking directly to the residents. For example, instead of just enforcing regulations and handing out traffic tickets, he hired mimes to make fun of traffic violators, to remind people that they themselves are the city. And it worked.

AL: I think this touches a really interesting point I was also following recently, this problem of over-regulation we have in cities and in countries of our developed world. Many of the projects I've researched are in areas that have either no building codes at all or nobody who enforces them. So the architects can just go off by themselves, with students or with some artist like you, and start building. If they had had to ask for permissions they would never have done it. Architects are trained to learn the rules and to follow them. But they can also influence the codes. This is something we should learn in the future. We should degrow the regulations. That would help people to come in and bring in their ideas and take ownership for one corner after another, and then they would identify themselves more with the city. Just take a public bench in a public park and then you post a sign above the entrance saying that one is not allowed to sleep on this bench. That's over-regulation – it turns against everyone.

MP: Over-regulation and deregulation are things we are focusing on right now in Guelph, a small city near Toronto in Canada.^[11] We have been working in the Brant neighbourhood, which is one of the city's poorest; it has been stigmatized as a place you want to get out of as soon as possible. If you stay, you're considered a failure. The residents are struggling with overregulation. For example, the children who have a garden in the front yard of their school aren't allowed to eat the vegetables they grow there. It doesn't make any sense. We've been organizing workshops where the residents talk with people from various disciplines to imagine how to develop initiatives, how to change their environment. They want to do things, but they're afraid to because at every step they bump into regulations and bylaws. The laws are counterproductive; they make you feel helpless. If people want the neighbourhood to prosper and grow, they need to be more engaged. Now is the time for it, too: the city is pulling back its financial support and the neighbourhoods are left to fight for funding

among themselves. It's not only about residents struggling in a small city in Canada. European cities, too, need residents to be more engaged, to be empowered. One tool for moving ahead is to work with people from different disciplines and backgrounds. This is different from when some specialist comes in and tells you what you need to do. What's important is exchanging knowledge, talking to each other, and working together to construct a new way of doing things. I agree that projects like the ones I do and the ones you've assembled in your book represent a very small part of what's going on today in art and architecture. But nevertheless, I think there's a movement among artists and architects who think in this way. An artist can be the moderator between the residents and institutions, the government, and so on. This involves much more than just listening to their problems and helping out. The artist can mediate people's vision of the city they want to live in. If you follow the process step by step, if you are engaged with people from the beginning, the project will be successful. And places of crisis will become an inspiration for others; they will become places of hope.

AL: I'm really tired of this iconic architecture that's generally covered by the media. What is the idea of architecture behind this? Is architecture a profession to produce large-scale luxury objects? Or is architecture a discipline that's engaged in the problems of society? Only a tiny fraction of the global society is currently served by architects. But they are highly trained professionals in design, multi-skilled and intelligent people. They have a responsibility to the rest of society!

MP: *Caracas: Growing Houses*, my contribution to the Architektonika exhibition, is a case study in informal architecture. For me, these architectural case studies are portraits of cities. I believe that by reading architecture you understand the values of the society. Self-built cities have something to tell us. I come from the former Yugoslavia. In 2006, I co-organized a research project called *The Lost Highway Expedition*, in which a group of architects and artists travelled through the Western Balkans.[12] We looked at cities that, in some cases, had been totally rebuilt after the political changes and the wars. In this new society, modernist architecture and the social state had been left behind. The modernist architecture we were so proud of in Yugoslavia was now abandoned and left to decay – literally. The cities were self-built. Informal cities showed off 'heroic' houses, not unlike the case study I show at Architektonika. We looked at cities the residents themselves were producing, the new society that was emerging. I like to say that the 1960s and 1970s were a time of manifestos, when there were numerous social projects developed by architects and lots of ideas about serving the world community. Then, in the next forty years or so, roughly from 1968 to 2008, for some reason, I'm not sure why, neoliberalism gradually took over. Since the financial crisis of 2008, we have been living in another period of opening. Suddenly, all these ideas from 1968 are re-emerging – totally remade of course. Before, there were large-scale utopias, like the idea of ecology; now there are much more down-to-earth strategies, more personal, more existential, on a small scale, and local. But basically, it's the same vision: to create a city together with the citizens, to serve the citizens.

AL: Right, it's the same direction. It's just less politically engaged, it's more pragmatic, let's call it: radically pragmatic. As you said, some architects are working in Caracas, some architects are working in Bogotá. They care about the

communities or about the society but not about the political system. And in this case I'm very positive about the power of an architect.

MP: When I was working on the Amsterdam project, I learned that the city had given the public land in New West to the housing corporations. The problem was that the municipality was serving the developers and their vision of the city, while the residents were being left to fend for themselves. Democracy was broken. But it's important that the link between residents and government works. Democracy, after all, is a social construction.

AL: Let's face it. The financial crisis broke out with the crash of the housing market in the US. As the housing market turned into a speculative business that lost its relation to the real needs of society it became the reason for this global crisis. And that's why I totally agree when you say the government cannot draw back from responsibility, like taking care of affordable housing, of social space, of these questions. There's a responsibility of politics for the built environment. Years ago everybody believed in the future of cars, for example. The US gave up public infrastructure completely, like public transport and light-rail and bike lanes and all these things and they're now desperately trying to get back to it. But they lost 60 years of city development, destroyed even what they had. So if you go to St. Louis, just to give one example that stands for many other cities in the US, you go to the center of the city but there is no center any longer in the sense of that word, there are only garages, some office buildings and empty space in between and no people on the streets – only in cars. Suburbanization has driven people out of the center and produced the need for cars. Now the inner city houses are empty and cities like Denver and many others are rapidly shrinking, there's no identity of the city any more. We have to think more about what is the social space, not just the public space of the city.

MP: Yes, it's about social space. Lately, we talk a lot about place-making. A group that wants to be recognized in a society needs to have a physical space – that's place-making. Space isn't an abstract concept any more; it's physical and existential. At the same time, communities reach beyond their local place by using communication media. I am thinking specifically about the project *Barefoot College* in India.[13] Do you know it? It's a self-sustainable rural community, which, again, was founded in the 1970s and is now being quietly recognized. It's one of the success stories of self-organization. The village is completely solar-powered and practices rainwater harvesting. The idea they had was simple – instead of migrating to cities, to become part of the urban poor, villagers would stay in the village and lead a dignified life through a combination of traditional practices and high technology: They demystify the hi-tech. They train women to become solar power engineers. They know how to maintain the technology themselves. The interesting thing is that *Barefoot College* makes use of globalization in its own way. They target rural communities around the world and teach them how to use solar panelling and practice rainwater harvesting. They don't go to cities and teach urban people how to use solar panelling. They've built their own network, a sort of parallel society. They are firmly grounded in the local, but they also have a global network. So it's not about rejecting globalization; it's on another level entirely. I would suggest that the rural condition is an agent for change in the twenty-first century. The twentieth century was all about cities, but today cities are experiencing fatigue; they are weighed down by the civilization they created. And the ideas coming from rural areas – I'm thinking of community gardens and informal cities here too – are

outside-the-box ideas. They are making a difference in the search for a more sustainable existence.

AL: I know about *Barefoot College*, it's a very interesting project, but I think it's very limited in its impact. It's just one community with some networks, but it didn't have an impact on the way of living in Europe or in America.

MP: No, on the contrary. They're having a big impact, but they only target rural communities, not cities. If you look at their website, you'll see that they are working with perhaps fifty rural communities around the world. *Barefoot College* is one of many projects that seek to empower communities; it's just that they don't get much media attention because they're not about making money. They're not power-brokers, because they don't produce a lot of capital.

AL: I'm totally confident that these are the more relevant projects at the moment for the future of the society and the future of the city in general. And that's why it's important for me to show them in exhibitions. It is the responsibility of the curator to pick these examples and to bring them to the public's attention. The museum is a cultural and social place for meeting with art and other people. The number of museum visitors is constantly growing. But why? Because people are tired of virtual realities – they want to gather in a space that gives them a real experience, some new ideas and inspiration for their lives, something they can share with friends. And this is more and more important: creating spaces for physical and social encounter to change the city in the future.

MP: Exactly, encounters. Clearly, there is a trend: people want to be more engaged; they want to be part of a design process that allows them to envision the city they want to live in. They don't want to just inhabit the city; they want to produce it. We have to change our way of living, which is much more difficult than building a house.

Notes

1. The conversation between Marjetica Potrč and Richard Sennett took place as part of the Wide Open School Project at the Hayward Gallery, London, 16 June 2012.

2. *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour*, 2009, part of Stedelijk Goes West, in the Nieuw West district of Amsterdam. The project was organized by Marjetica Potrč and Wilde Westen (Lucia Babina, Reinder Bakker, Hester van Dijk, Sylvain Hartenberg, Merijn Oudenampsen, Eva Pfannes, and Henriette Waal) and supported by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Far West (Amsterdam), and the Netherlands Architecture Fund (Rotterdam).

3. *Prinzessinnengärten* (Princess Gardens) is a community garden in Berlin that has been launched by the non-profit company Nomadisch Grün (Nomadic Green) in 2009. <http://prinzessinnengarten.net/> (21 Sept. 2012).

4. *Dry Toilet* (2003), a collaborative project by Lijet Esakov and Marjetica Potrč, in Caracas, Venezuela, supported by La Vega community in Caracas, the CARACAS CASE stipend programme of the Federal Cultural Foundation of Germany, and the Venezuelan Ministry of the Environment.
5. The Tempelhofer airport in Berlin ceased operating in 2008. 2010 the runways were opened to the public. <http://thf100.de/> (21 Sept. 2012).
6. Andres Lepik (ed.), *Moderators of Change. Architektur, die hilft. Architecture that helps*, Jahresring 58. Jahrbuch für moderne Kunst, Ostfildern 2011.
7. On an artist's residency at the invitation of the 27th São Paulo Biennial (*How to Live Together*), São Paulo, Brazil.
8. *Rural Studio* was founded in 1993 within Auburn University's School of Architecture (US). The studio is conceived as a strategy to improve the living conditions in rural Alabama while imparting practical experience to architecture students. <http://apps.cadc.auburn.edu/rural-studio/Default.aspx> (21 Sept. 2012).
9. Van Bo Le-Mentzel (ed.), *Hartz IV Moebel.com. Build More Buy Less! Konstruieren statt Konsumieren!*, Ostfildern 2012.
10. Cf. Martin Wagner, *Das wachsende Haus. Ein Beitrag zur Lösung der städtischen Wohnungsfrage*, Berlin 1932.
11. *The Brant Club* (2012), mural, public debates and workshops, by Marjetica Potrč and Lucia Babina, supported by the Brant Community and developed as part of the Guelph Program of the Musagetes Foundation.
12. *Lost Highway Expedition* (2006), a research journey through nine cities in the Western Balkans (Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Skopje, Prishtina, Tirana, Podgorica, and Sarajevo).
13. Established in 1972, the *Barefoot College* is a non-governmental organisation that has been providing basic services and solutions to problems in rural communities, with the objective of making them self-sufficient and sustainable. <http://www.barefootcollege.org/> (21 Sept. 2012).