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# TRANS-BORDERLANDS ACTIVATING THE PLASTICITY OF URBAN BORDER-SPACE

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Michael Contento, Lindsey Sherman

Borderland<sup>1</sup>: 1a) territory at or near a border

1b) fringe

2) a vague intermediate state or region

Within the contemporary city and contemporary global context (more specifically in what we have termed the Global South) there exists a network of restrictive borders, a network of limiting mechanisms generated by physical, geographical, political, social, cultural, and economic difference. These apparatus manifest themselves in various ways to inhibit essential forms of interaction and communication within the urban context by generating privative difference. But this milieu of restrictive edges also presents a valuable opportunity, one in which new forms of social design and communication are made possible. These borderlands introduce the possibility of manipulating their inherent, yet conventionally ignored, flexibility into new spaces of interaction. Social design can be strengthened through this critical engagement with the plasticity of the edge – by unearthing the territory of Border-Space.

«The subjection of factional privilege to challenge and conflict has been the single most important spur to social plasticity.»<sup>2</sup> One of the tasks in our work has been to identify and define borders in order to uncover the territory in which to intervene. We have defined this territory as Border-Space – a new terrain within conventional borders that is fertile ground for the responsible and democratic development of the contemporary city. Throughout history, borders have played many different roles and have assumed many different forms with various levels of porosity. Boundaries have evolved into a multitude of typologies – physical, political, economic – ranging from the apparent to the invisible and from the rigid to the amorphous. Despite ostensible limits of demarcation, many borders throughout

allowed individual buildings to effectively ‘plug in’ and catalyze these processes of social interaction. But today, as the contemporary city continues to grow (in both density and scale), the automobile continues to dominate as a mode of transportation, and public space continues to devolve into a development commodity, it becomes more difficult to craft these public spaces of interaction. As a result, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need to re-conceptualize or re-define the edge as ‘occupiable’, to engage in this intermediate border-space as the new opportunity for productive public space. Plugging into this once marginalized zone will encourage new processes of social design.

If we extend Goethe’s metaphor<sup>3</sup> beyond architecture, we might say that urbanism is ‘frozen politics’. It then becomes apparent that there is a need to develop new mechanisms that can ‘unfreeze’ the boundaries of this condition to open up opportunities for new forms of communication – a need to transform static conventions into dynamic interaction. Not only will this engagement with the edge create an architecture and urbanism that is greater than the sum of its parts, but, through responsible manipulation of the borderland, it will also open up the border-space that makes the 21st century democratic city possible.

This essay presents a series of possible border readings with ways to conceptualize how design can effectively operate within this global condition to spur new forms of urban interventions and social design. The three sections – Identify, Activate, Transcend – represent a methodological approach to working within this global network of divisive borders.

#### IDENTIFY – NAVIGATING THE BORDER-SPACE OF OUR GLOBAL CONDITION

Welcome to the Global South, a network of urban villages. It is less a place than a condition – a condition that has always existed but has been exponentially exaggerated by the rapid acceleration of urbanization, a condition that is representative of the global context, a condition of a complex network of static and prohibitive borders.

These multifaceted borders are simultaneously sharp yet ambiguous, generating a problematic that is difficult to identify. They exist in the marginalized periphery while occupying the heart of major metropolises. They form and are formed by political, economic, social, morphological, and geographical divisions between countries, cultures, ethnicities, neighborhoods, streets and buildings. They operate concurrently at manifold scales, effectively becoming scale-less – ranging from invisible moments to monumental structures. These borders empower some, while depriving others. These borders are universal; this is our global condition.

history and within our present condition are not or were not clearly defined in every respect. As such, borders present conditions of perceived neutrality or porosity and provide opportunities to create counter-narratives.

Our interest in this topic navigates between two areas of research: 1) comparative studies of urban contexts (political, social, economic, and cultural) and 2) the urban borderlands of the Global South. These concerns originate from our extensive work in the barrios, favelas, and conflict zones within South American cities. In our work we have attempted to develop a theory of Border-Space through both the comparative studies of and the resultant interventions in these unique borderlands and conflict zones. We have expanded and enriched our strong interest in urban politics, economics (what makes cities wealthy or poor? what is the impact of economic integration on urban politics?), and international relations by focusing on these intermediate borderlands. In our effort to develop a strong theoretical contribution to the study of borderlands and through our subsequent operations and designs within these edges, which were once perceived as impermeable limits, are now perceived as formative beginnings.

Through a broad historical lens, one can make the general statement that cities have existed through various modes of interaction. From Greek and Roman cities through the Passagenwerk of Walter Benjamin, cities can be understood as a framework of spaces of social interaction – the history of urbanism as the history of the morphological evolution of public space. Historically, public spaces have been conceived as zones of social communication that

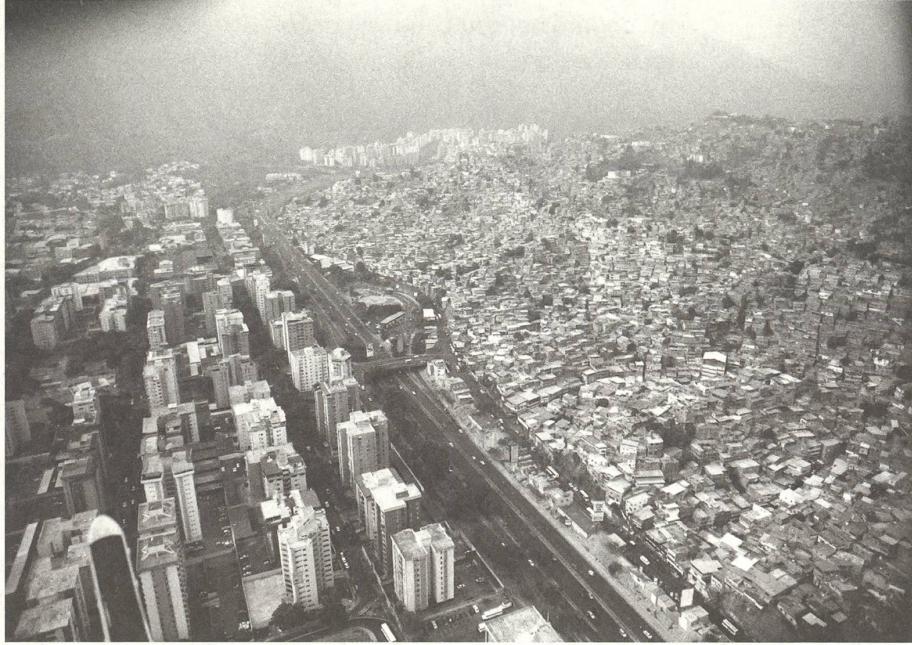


fig. a  
Petare and la Urbina.

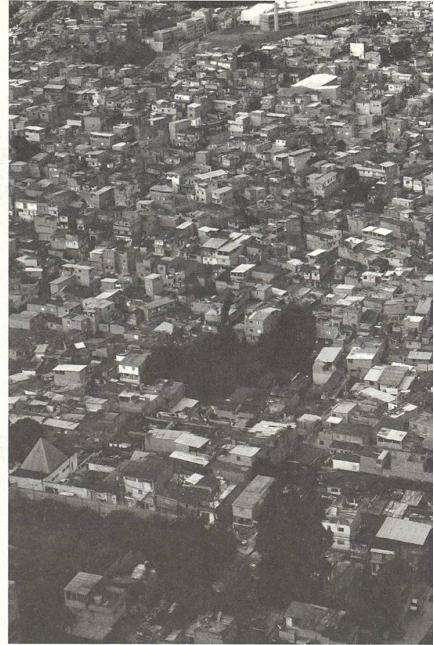


fig. b  
Morumbi - Paraisópolis Juxtaposition, Fabio Knoll  
Paraisópolis, São Paulo, Brazil. The city's largest favela is bordered by Morumbi, one of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods.



fig. d  
Squatted Building, Caracas, Venezuela.  
The coexistence of economically marginalized population with economic and political conditions that cause stagnation exposes alternative occupations of this alignment.

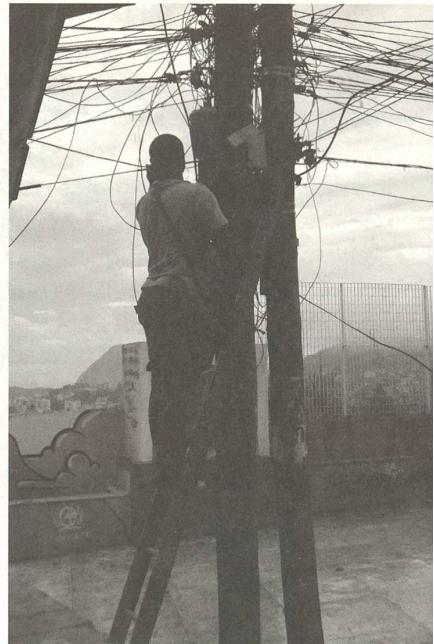


fig. e  
Informal plug in  
Morro de Providência, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Although it is located in the center of the city, other borders prevent Morro de Providência from being officially connected with the city's infrastructure. The inhabitants must informally plug in to access water and electricity.



**fig. c**  
Grotao trash  
Paraisópolis, São Paulo, Brazil. Marginalization created by political, economic and geographical difference.



**fig. f**  
Israel/Palestine  
West Bank. Continued political conflict prevents effective action while strengthening the perception of difference.

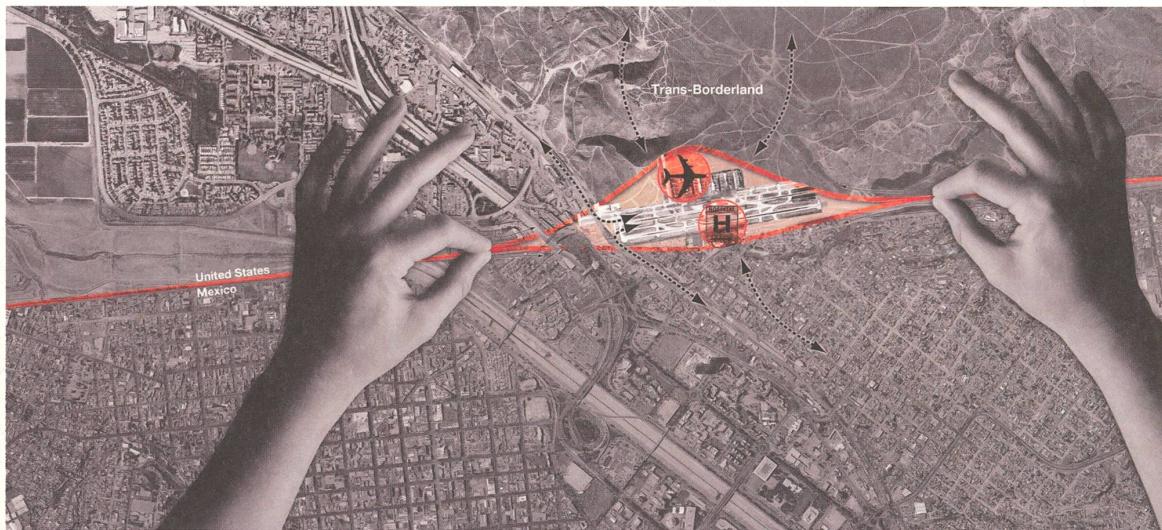


fig. 9  
Geneva Model: US Mexico border opened to allow for cross border international travel.

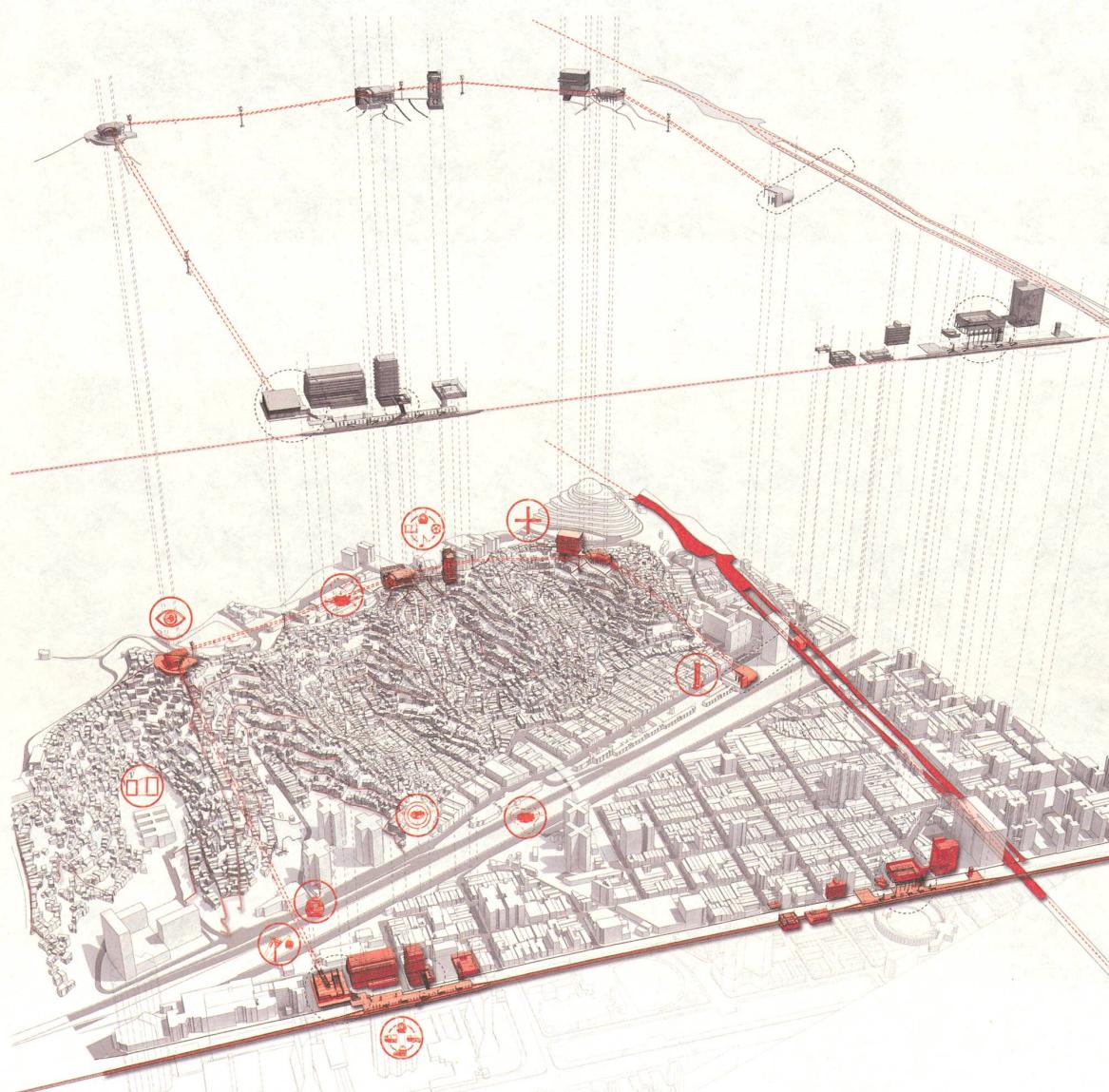


fig. h  
Metro Cable, exploded axo.

These borders and border-spaces manifest themselves in many different ways and with different signs and/or signification. On a large scale, organizations that have transcended certain political or national boundaries in the interest of integration (EU, NAFTA, etc...) have created situations in which established borders become partially overridden or even obsolete, thereby opening «cross-border regions»<sup>4</sup>. These zones generate opportunities for communication across borders and new economic growth. These types of zones often occur at smaller scales in the Informal City of the Global South, and this is where we locate our work and research. We can find anomalous situations that present interesting and important opportunities for social design. While most research has focused on how to cross borders, ours has focused on opening up and defining border-space to actively engage in creating new territories for design.

#### ACTIVATE – UNFOLDING BORDER-SPACE THROUGH COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

It is within this Global Condition that we will find the space to act, to generate a new agency to operate effectively in the contemporary city. Here is where we engage the plastic border.

It is our responsibility as designers to generate social and political change through the precise identification and activation of the edge. It is our responsibility to manipulate these borders from the ground up, to solve global problems with local solutions. We realize that the mechanisms of the border will remain – physical, political, social, economic – thus in order to take action we must develop an agency to operate responsibly in transforming these mechanisms into a productive medium of interaction.

Without a script and with only a camera in hand we have set off. We will find a new city emerging within and across conventional borders. We will see the experience of people whose political, social and economic upheaval has placed them in one of the greatest challenges facing the world today. We will look for the visionaries of tomorrow, the planners and thinkers who are working with space, movement, people and places to create a future that improves the current condition with effective and innovative solutions.

#### TRANSCEND – OCCUPATION OF BORDER-SPACE THROUGH SOCIAL DESIGN

With this new knowledge in hand, we can begin to develop a unique agency to reinvent boundaries. In this way we can redefine the contemporary city.

The Metro-Cable project in San Agustín, Caracas, (fig. h - j) was conceived as a collective protest and counter-narrative against regular procedures and the government plan for the expansion of a disruptive road network

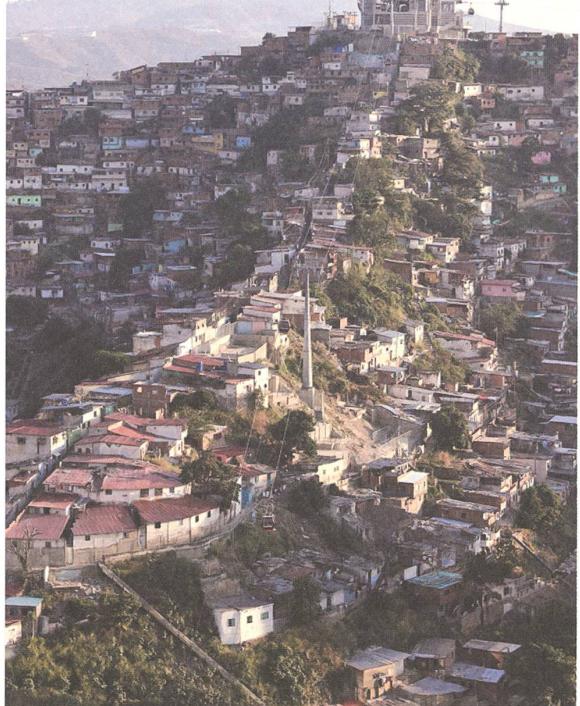


fig. i  
Metro Cable, © Iwan Baan photo.

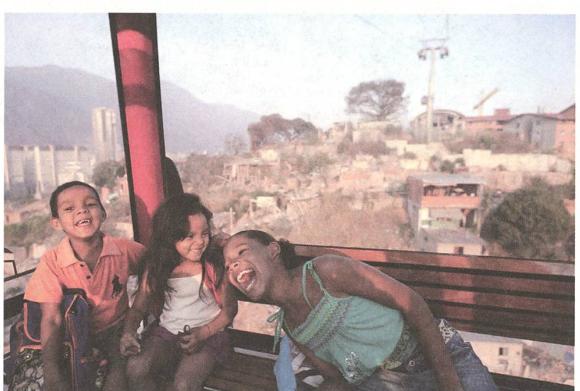


fig. i  
Metro Cable, © Iwan Baan photo.

through the fragile neighborhood. Transportation was needed to provide basic access for a population of 40'000 people and necessary services, and, in a direct challenge to the evolutionary urban design process, we leapfrogged to an urban cable car as an alternative interurban transport solution. The cable car itself is formless; it neither transforms the existing neighborhood nor questions the pedestrian character of the densely settled mountain. By transcending the geographical and political boundaries of the San Agustín barrio, the MetroCable creates new physical and spatial conditions that now occupy the once rigid border. By manipulating the plasticity of the traditional edge, this project exposes new potential for growth, connection, participation and interaction.

Located in a primarily inaccessible high-risk zone in Paraisópolis, (fig. I - n) the Grotão project generates the opportunity to transform the vacated site into a productive zone and public space through social design. This is achieved through a process of analyzing the conditions of rapid growth and improving marginalized settlements through social infrastructure. The project unfolds a new space of intervention through the introduction of a terraced, agricultural landscape with leisure, sports and cultural activities organized where these were once categorically neglected.

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The project proposes that architects eschew their conventional role in traditional hierarchies and instead serve as an enabling connection between the opposing forces of top-down planning and bottom-up initiatives. Acting to attract and create common ground for these two forces, architects can eliminate divisiveness and generate productive interactions. Here the priority becomes equipping the peripheral neighborhood with infrastructure, water, sewage networks, lighting, services and public space in addition to other urban interventions, such as the improvement of social equipment in the areas of health, education, culture and sports. The proposed urban model aims to translate into spatial solutions a society's need for equal access to housing, employment, technology, services, education, and resources – fundamental rights for all city dwellers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Within this conceptualization and methodology, borders can be stretched and permeated to subvert traditional distinctions within the urban condition and debunk the myths that have so far maintained a stronghold on the perception and growth of the contemporary city. This is not to say that the *‘formal’* and *‘informal’* parts of the city will become indistinguishable, but that the standard ways of bifurcating the urban space in this way no longer apply. The ways in which these borders are read, occupied and integrated can be transformed to generate a potent zone for social design and interaction.

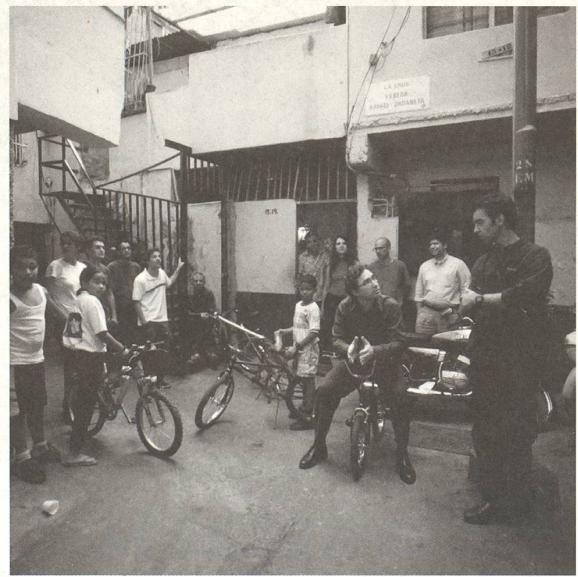


fig. k  
Community engagement.

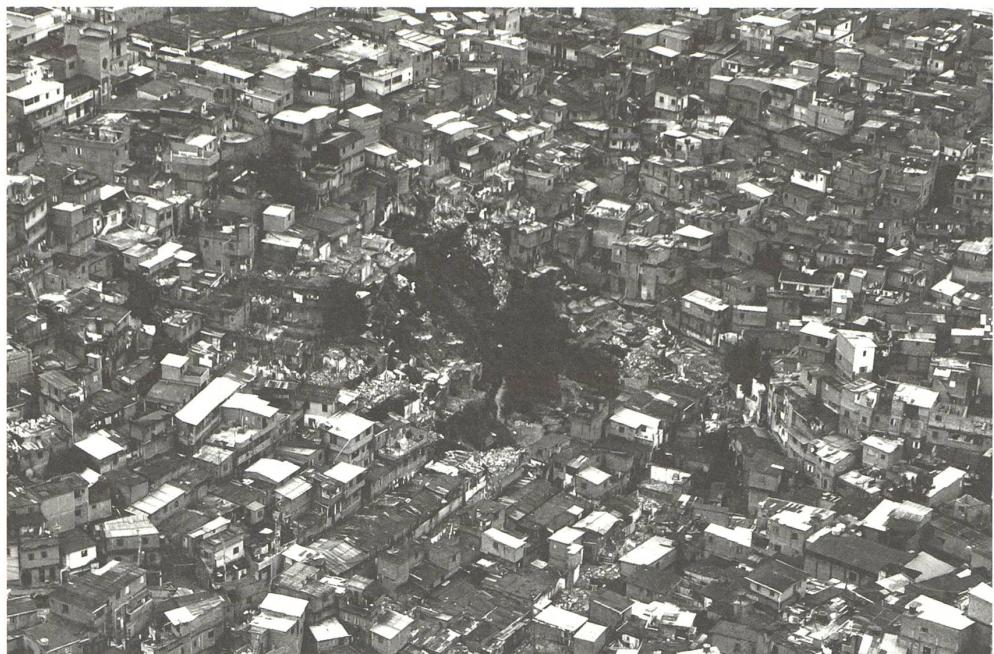


fig. l  
Grotto, existing site.



fig. m  
Grotto, overall.

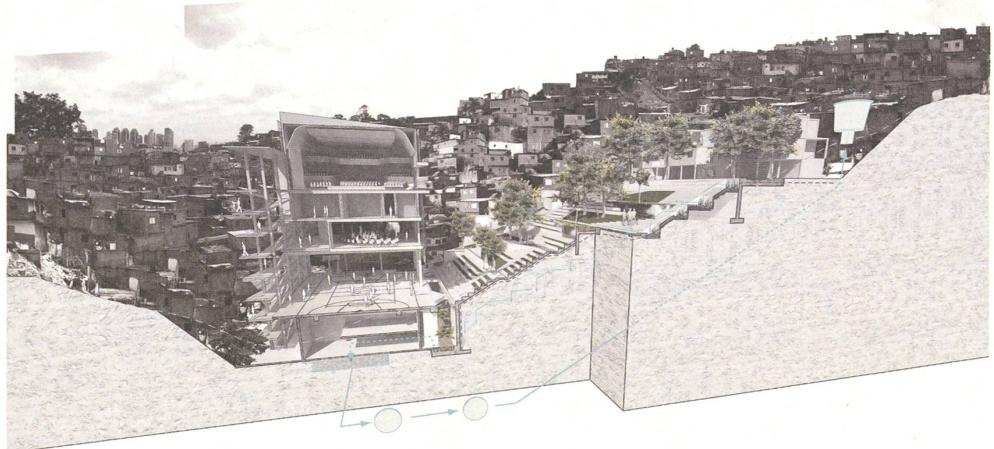


fig. n  
Grotto, section perspective.

**Borders can no longer be defined by their traditional political or economic limits. Territories of political boundaries are crossed every day, therefore rendering their mode of authority obsolete.**

**Borders can no longer be delimited by geography in a conventional or assumed sense. Political and economic edges no longer have to coincide with geographical boundaries. Where topographical difference has traditionally separated the *formal city* from the *informal city*, infrastructure has allowed the marginalized population to overcome the challenging topography to participate in social and economic activity. Therefore one can uncouple geography and politics (as one no longer defines the other) and promote social participation.**

**Borders present a new transitory zone that can accept a multiplicity of new ideas that stitch formerly segregated areas of the city together. These plastic borders represent opportunities to strengthen social design through their engagement and manipulation.**

**We must transgress traditional boundaries to enter into the vague zone of borderlands, to expand border-space into a productive zone of new interactions.**

Trans-Borderlands are not the problem; they are the solution.

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