

Depth of field : adventures in blurry urbanism

Autor(en): **Kairuz, Eduardo**

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DEPTH OF FIELD: ADVENTURES IN BLURRY URBANISM

fig. 061

*High-Rise Barrio (Squatted Skyscraper), detail.
2012.*

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Eduardo Kairuz

THIS IS DEPTH OF FIELD

In film and photography, depth of field is the range of distance in which objects appear acceptably sharp. A space determined by complex relationships existing between distance, focus, film speed and diaphragm aperture, it is an instrument used by photographers and cinematographers to define and concentrate images within the frame. But for an instrument of delimitation, it is curious that there are no clear boundaries attainable through depth of field. Even though capable of establishing difference through the designation of harder or softer relationships between the elements that constitute the image, depth of field is inexorably determined by the blur; a condition in which definition, focus and concentration become permeable delimitations. In this way, depth of field is a tool with which definition is produced from the acknowledgement of an inevitable lack of sharpness, and this is key for elaborating alternative models of architectural design production such as the idea of 'blurry urbanism'.

According to Paul Anirudh, Shetty Prasad and Krishnan Shekhar, blurry urbanism works in opposition to the

master plan: no preconceived models of organization but rather the implementation of flexible strategies enforced through single yet interrelated interventions capable of defining successful urban operations in time – an aspect often ignored by most radical urban doctrines. As the authors maintain,

«This is the condition of blurry urbanism – where ownerships are contested, domains are undefined or overlapping, and architecture is temporary.»¹

Now, by acknowledging these conditions as potentials and values, contemporary urban and architectural design would find a fertile ground of exploration in the self-organization structures that have emerged in most cities around the globe: I am referring to the vast constructed accumulations commonly known as informal urban settlements. These highly complex structures, in which approximately one billion people live today, have recently been acknowledged as places of distinctive and valid configurations of open, flexible and resilient spatial arrangements. Here, informal programmes of activities have been developed from an accumulation of popular knowledge that are able to produce rich

fig. 062

Part of the series 'Place it!'

2000.

© Sabine Bitter, Helmut Weber.

visual structures of sequential growth and stratified densification. These are also seen as contingencies that often resist the oppressive conditions imposed by large scale modern urban devices, questioning the pretension and validity of the ideals that modernism produced for the city.

HI-RES

The impact that some of these modern urban implementations have had on their respective physical and social contexts is evidenced by many signs, one being the arid vastnesses of cities such as Canberra and Brasilia^{fig. 062}, or the unresolved tension visible in places such as 'Barrio 23 de Enero'^{fig. 061}, a massive urban enclave in which the forces of the formal and the informal clash unresolved.

An unprecedented social housing development, built from 1953 to 1956 in the centre-west of Caracas, 'Unidad Residencial 2 de Diciembre' (as it was formerly known until the violent overthrow of the government in 1958) occupied an area of approximately 220 hectares (it grew considerably as a result of the emergence of the informal settlements) comprising nearly 9,200 apartments served by an array infrastructural devices and complementary service buildings. Designed to accommodate 60,000 new city migrants, this remarkable intervention – conceived by the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva under the principles of modern architecture – represented the vision of the true progressive planner, it could not have been less radical in its task of introducing unprecedented modes of 'modern living', embodied as symbols of power, progress and development to a society in need of housing, services and infrastructure.

Nonetheless, '23 de Enero' was already doomed by a limited vision that did not foresee the impact that those radical ideals would have in its extended period of existence. An experiment such as this – similarly envisioned in Asia (Chandigarh), Europe (Plan Voisin) and once more South America (Brasilia) – failed in its understanding of the social fabric that had to be crossed with its messianic problem-solving agenda. So ingrained on achieving their promise of modernity, these models were incapable of attaining a better grasp of their surrounding realities, overseeing the radical outcomes that were yet to hit abruptly as spontaneous resistance to artificial and uninhabitable environments. These distinctive situations have given way to the emergence of particular episodes of intellectual tension. These include confrontations

between a romantic vision that validates the installation of fluid yet problematic arrangements brought by informality and another, radically pragmatic vision that demands the implementation of 'tabula-rasa' mechanisms exercised excessively by exemplary modern planners.

LO-RES

The indeterminate, middle space between these two seemingly irreconcilable extremes seems worth exploring with the conditions that are potentially attainable through depth of field and blurry urbanism. Contrary to the flexibility offered by these instruments – and similar to military strategies of spatial organization² – modern urbanism worked predominantly from above, distancing itself intellectually from its target and relying on a total vision as an instrument for urban domination. Nevertheless, as we have seen, this authoritarian model failed in its pretension to absolute control because it was incapable of determining the precise range of distances necessary to understand the particulars and complexities of the urban body. This substantial flaw is part of a series of fundamental issues that provoked the emergence of the informal urban settlements that populate most major cities around the world. But it also prompted the establishment of a spontaneous system of reciprocal adaptability that is as rich to explore as it is essential to understand for the successful configuration of a blurry urbanism.

«The imposed knowledge and symbolism become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them. [...] Unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce something resembling the 'lignes d'erre' described by Deligny. They trace 'indeterminate trajectories' that are apparently meaningless, since they do not cohere with the constructed, written and prefabricated space through which they move.»³

This is a challenge that has been addressed by people such as Alejandro Aravena, Teddy Cruz, Marjetica Potrč and Sabine Bitter + Helmut Weber; architects and artists who have built up their production and research agendas from the documentation and interpretation of reality influenced by the ideas of theorists such as Saskia Sassen, Neil Smith and Michel de Certeau. The examples that follow illustrate our conceptualization of blurry urbanism.

fig. 063

‘Land(e)scape’.
1999.

© Casagrande & Rintala

Developed on different scales and addressing broad and specific problematics, they achieve a balance between architecture and urban planning crossed with a wider realm of disciplines, most prominently contemporary art.

THE ADVENTURES

I

Few examples come to mind when thinking of successful large scale operations that approach the idea of depth of field and blurry urbanism. But one that is worth mentioning is the revitalization of the city of Barcelona, developed for the 1992 Olympics. Aimed at a significant transformation of a rusted urban environment, Josep Acebillo and the Urban Development Institute of Barcelona approached this massive challenge from a deliberately indeterminate perspective. Acebillo and his team avoided the usual mechanisms of total vision and absolute control practiced by traditional and modern urban planning. To the contrary, their focus was placed on the urban particle in relation to its similes and close surroundings. Their intention was to promote the necessary transformation on a city scale from a fragmented vision, a model that curiously was proposing to undertake a plan that had no master plan. In Acebillo’s own words, the answer to this challenge was closer to acupuncture than to traditional western medicine, an idea that has also been

investigated by a newer generation of architects and artists such as Sami Rintala and Marco Casagrande.

II

In 1999, Casagrande & Rintala pushed forward the idea of urban acupuncture coming very close to that of depth of field and blurry urbanism. Overlapping the disciplinary spaces of architecture and contemporary art (sculpture, performance and site-specific installation were recurrent in their collaborations) Casagrande & Rintala produced ‘Land(e)scape’, a piece that promotes urban transformation understood as a model of political activism^{fig. 063}. Raising questions about tradition, models of production, rural depopulation and landscape transformation in the midst of the increasing tensions existing between tradition and progress in contemporary Finland, Casagrande & Rintala collaborated with local communities and reclaimed a number of abandoned barns. Transported and raised 15 feet over an empty field near Savonlinna, in the north of the country, this re-version of Archigram’s ‘Walking City’ (1964) ended up in flames in a ritual-like performance that reflected the effects that the depopulation of certain rural areas of Finland were having on the formal and political reconfigurations of the countryside and the city.

Although Casagrande & Rintala’s project was not an operation of urban design per-se (it did not address

issues with traditionally accepted mechanisms) it was a significant act, bringing public awareness to this problematic not only to the Finnish community but also to a wide international audience. As such, the effects produced by ‹Land(e)scape› underline Acebillo's proven belief in the possibility of achieving urban transformation through pointed and disseminate operations. Moreover, they share an interest in the idea of urban acupuncture as a stake against the master planner, defined by an understanding of the urban body as «complex energy organism(s) in which different overlapping layers of energy flows are determining the actions of the citizens as well as the development of the city.»⁴ Now, I believe these flows of energy constituting the urban body can be activated and transformed at will through intelligent strategies developed through depth of field. This is exemplified in the projects developed by Matías and Mateo Pintó for the ‹barrio of La Vega› in Caracas.

III

Departing from a retroactive understanding of a context characterised by separation and conflict (where ideological inconsistencies, spatial and territorial conflict, uncontrolled growth and urban detriment

are the rule) the brothers Matías and Mateo Pintó⁵ embarked on a design investigation developed between the extremes. In their project Substitute Housing (1999-2001), an almost archaeological procedure of revision, organization and categorization of the modernist superblock (from which those of ‹23 de Enero› are examples) confronted the features of a fierce informal settlement.^{fig. 064} Destabilizing the rigid character of the modernist model, the project was developed through a series of procedures of formal and geometrical deformations of the original nature of the superblock, addressing the unresolved tension between the block and its geographical location.

Starting from an examination and acknowledgement of the existing conditions of the informal urban environments of Caracas (specifically of La Vega), these proposals questioned the models imposed by modernism in that context. Another project, Block Housing + Assistance Centre (2002-03), explores the possibility of bypassing the abrupt separation between the formal and the informal structures of the city. Producing infrastructure conceived as a communal unit of programmatic complexities, the idea is developed as a mixed-use yet articulated

fig. 064

Pedestrian Connectors
2001.

© Matías & Mateo Pintó

building that transversally follows the slope of the site. In this way, the intervention provides housing, leisure and commercial services as well as physical connections to the community of the barrio. The building then becomes a connection hub of local reach that bridges the spatial conflict present in that specific context.

HAZE

If we are to undertake the challenge of the further development of our cities, tension, difference and confrontation will have to be assumed as regular conditions. At the crossroads of such circumstances, unprecedented opportunities of exploration and renovation of architectural design and thinking lie ahead. This is exciting but only feasible through the acknowledgement of the ambiguity and indeterminacy that characterize our society, and these are also features of the instruments we have exposed here. Technology will surely help, but a blind belief in its promise and potentials has already been shown to be a recipe for disaster. For the challenges ahead, a critical and sound understanding of the conditions we are confronted with in combination with the exciting resources presented by local techniques is essential to shape the architecture of the future.

- 1 Anirudh, Paul; Prasad, Shetty & Shekhar, Krishnan: 'The city as extracurricular space: re-instituting urban pedagogy in South Asia', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, Number 3, Routledge, London, 2005.
- 2 Curiously enough, in most contexts in which large, modern urban operations were enforced, authoritarian regimes were in rule, that is the case of Venezuela under Colonel Marcos Pérez Jiménez rule and the governments influenced by the Soviet Union after World War II.
- 3 de Certeau, Michel: 'The Practice of Everyday Life', University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.
- 4 Casagrande, Marco: 'Urban Acupuncture', Retrieved on May 10, 2010 from <http://helsinkiacupuncture.blogspot.com/> 5 Venezuelan architects currently based in Madrid and New York.

Eduardo Kairuz, born 1973

is a Venezuelan architect and artist based in Melbourne. His work investigates power and violence in relation to architecture and the city, and has been published and exhibited internationally—including articles for AD and projects for the Gwangju Design Biennale. He holds an MFA from the Sydney College of the Arts/University of Sydney and is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Art Design & Architecture of Monash University.