



# On the Political Equator

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## Resisting the Future-less City

Aaron Levy

Imagine yourself an urban curator who operates out of a small agency in a marginal neighborhood in a city. Your work is guided by a series of principles whose purpose is to incubate the city. Foremost among these are the enabling of practical knowledge through the curation of cultural relationships, the support of other institutions, and the production of new institutions.<sup>i</sup>

You gather with others to offer one another a window into the questions that have shaped your respective practices as they find their public forms. In the early history of your city, for example, you recall that small institutions operated as agencies in producing new correspondences, spaces, and organizations. Perhaps the point of departure for your project ought to be an attempt to radicalize this history that surrounds you.

And you extrude from that history models and methodologies that can be operative once again within your neighborhood. Yet in thinking of your neighborhood you are also thinking about the city, about the region, about the nation, about the global. What is your relationship to the collective? Where does your neighborhood begin and the city end? The city begin and the region end? The nation begin and the global end? There is simultaneously a local and global dimension to all of this, and you struggle to reconcile these relationships. That you live in a politicized society contributes to the urgency of your work.

Back to the neighborhood. There is a real anger among those you work with and meet every day about the unprecedented concentration of wealth and power in your city and the inequality it has produced. There is real concern about the supposed “solutions”—like green architecture—being offered. Your institutions, elected representatives and public practitioners continue to offer you cosmetic solutions—solutions that are so minimally creative as to leave the underlying structural problems and designs unchallenged.

This society is drawing you and everyone around you into the vortex of politics.<sup>ii</sup> It is a society of multiplying borders and boundaries, one marked by the erosion of trust between publics and institutions. It is a society that continually disinvests itself of all social responsibility, a society in which the basic dignity of other human beings is of diminishing concern. In this society, seemingly progressive institutions ensure with great politeness that everything stays exactly

the same. This is not a society that can be marked by happiness. This is not a society that you can be proud of. This is not a society that you love, let alone like.<sup>iii</sup>

Decades of disinvestment in public infrastructure and a lack of creative leadership has left your neighborhood struggling. It is becoming apparent to you that your intensive focus on the local has to be accompanied by an ability to enact changes on a larger scale.

Slowly, you lay the plans and determine the strategies for the rethinking of the “American Dream.” For who can be content, no matter how high the general standard of living may be, if even a fraction of your neighbors are ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure? Communities in need are not free communities. People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.<sup>iv</sup>

But this is a long conversation that began a long time ago.

What is becoming clear to you is that there is an urgent need for different institutions and for other civics and citizenships.<sup>v</sup> And so you begin to think differently about the future-less city. Maybe it has a future after all, just one not defined by the incessant construction of buildings and green spaces and so-called creative economies. Instead, it is based on principles of hospitality and responsiveness, and on the basic dignity of strangers. It is based on the mixing and exchange of ideas and cultures, on the idea of individuals and institutions moving in and out of and between others.

All your questions are coalescing around this one basic question: how will we live with others?<sup>vi</sup> But this begs the question of what constitutes otherness, and the relation of otherness to institutions more generally. For the urban institution of the future will not be bound by a single issue, identity, or practice. In fact, the urban institution of the future is no longer singular, for what is now required is a union of investigation and experimentation.<sup>vii</sup>

And within this concept of the union are found the concepts of the commons and the common good. These concepts offer another way of thinking, practicing, and experimenting that precedes the individual and does not belong to any individual institution in particular. Belonging to nobody, and not subject to division, perhaps these visions of the future will always be in formation, and will no longer be able to be claimed as mine or yours.<sup>viii</sup>

Begin anywhere.

## **Latin American Meander: In Search of a New Civic Imagination**

Teddy Cruz

I lived the first 20 years of my life in Guatemala City, until early 1982 when I migrated to the US to continue my architectural studies. During those convoluted years in Latin America – Guatemala being one of its epicenters of social injustice – I never imagined that the oppressive regimes consolidated by military dictatorships, rooted oligarchy and US Cold War interventionism that atrophied social and economic progress throughout this continent would transform so rapidly. Latin America has in fact radically reconfigured itself socio-politically and economically in the last years, becoming one of the main sectors in the world, breaking away from US-style globalization, charting instead its own idea of social and economic progress.

The institutional transformations that have been taking place in many South American capitals, including La Paz, Brasilia, Caracas, Lima and La Asunción have been altering the previous established protocols of control and influence that had traditionally aligned many of these countries with Washington DC, pointing at a very different political landscape that was hard to imagine barely 15 years ago. It has been surreal, for example, during this time to see the ascension to power of counter-establishment civic figures such as ex-union leader Ignácio de Lula in Brazil, who just ended a successful two-term presidency in this country, and Bolivian Evo Morales who, in an unprecedented way, opened the possibility for the under-represented aboriginal class of Bolivia to claim the presidency of that country.

In the context of the history of US-Latin American relations, I have found that this transformational process produced a strange cultural reversal: the institutional deficiency and corruption, the chronic illegality and infrastructural precariousness that generally shaped the US' perception of Latin America have now mutated to Washington DC and Wall Street. In other words, the consolidation of the US-led neoliberal, freemarket policies that culminated in the recent global economic collapse have been, at their very base, defined by unprecedented 'illegality' (the unchecked abuses of Wall Street are well documented by now, and continue to be emblemized by the mortgage crisis that drove millions of people to lose their homes) and 'uneven development' (in the US, recent years have been defined by an abandonment and de-funding of public institutions and infrastructure, such as the Katrina disaster in New Orleans and the polarization between enclaves of economic power and the sectors of precariousness that surround them).

Furthermore, the installment of this institutionalized, greedy individualism that has widened the gap between wealth and poverty so dramatically today also yielded hyper-nationalist protectionist strategies which, fuelled by politics of

fear and paranoia, defined a radically conservative social agenda that has had a fundamental impact on urban planning policy and legislation, yielding the incremental privatization and erosion of public culture in the US. It is somehow against this US-driven socio-cultural closure of the last years, polarizing the individual and the collective, that Latin America, generally speaking, has begun to chart a very different course, an alternative future: Latin American governments, from Brazil to Colombia, have produced a paradigm shift in matters of urban development, seeking – like no other place in the world – to reconnect public policy, social justice and civic imagination.

### **New Sites of Experimentation: An Urbanism Beyond the Property Line**

While the world's architecture intelligentsia – supported by the glamorous economy of the last years – flocked en masse to the Arab Emirates and China to help build the dream castles that would catapult these enclaves of wealth as global epicenters of urban development, many of these high-profile projects have in fact only perpetuated the exhausted recipes of an oil-hungry, US-style globalization, camouflaging with hyper-aesthetics an architecture of exclusion based in many cases on urbanities of surveillance and control. Other than a few isolated protagonist architectural interventions whose images have been disseminated widely, no major ideas were advanced here to transform existing paradigms of housing, infrastructure and density and resolve the major problems of urbanization today which are grounded in the inability of institutions of urban development to engage informality, socioeconomic inequity and lack of affordable housing and infrastructure.

While the attention of the world had been focused on those enclaves of abundance, the most radical ideas advancing new models of urban development were produced on sites of scarcity, across Latin American cities. Challenging entrenched neoliberal urban logics of development founded on top-down privatization, homogeneity and exclusion, visionary mayors in cities such as Porto Alegre, Curitiba, Bogotá and Medellín began to enable new institutional protocols by producing new interfaces with publics and unorthodox cross-institutional collaborations, rethinking the very meaning of infrastructure, housing and density and mediating top-down development and bottom-up social organization. I cannot think of any other continental region in the world where we can find this type of collective effort led by municipal and federal governments seeking a new brand of progressive politics to produce an urbanism of inclusion.

Different to the other epicenters of development in the world that in recent years relied on conventional planning approaches 'from above', sponsoring stand-alone experimental architectural gestures supported by large capital and corporate branding, many of these Latin American cities were experimenting, in

fact, by reconfiguring socioeconomic relations first, uncovering the potential of informal systems and social networks to rethink urbanization, negotiating formal and informal economies and large and small scales of development. Much of this experimentation began a few years ago with unorthodox public policies and economics, which have already become mythical.

These experiments ranged, for example, from the decision by the municipality of Porto Alegre in Brazil to enact 'participatory budgets', enabling communities to decide the distribution of municipal budgets; to Brazilian president Ignácio de Lula's economic policy awarding property titles to thousands of slum dwellers in Rio de Janeiro and declaring the intervention into slums as a vital part of his urban development agenda, not by erasure but by retrofit; to the announcement by President Evo Morales that he would insert illegal coca production into the Bolivian national economy to subsidize social housing; to Bogotá's ex-mayor Antanas Mockus' mobilization of a civic culture founded on a massive urban pedagogical project that paved the way for one of the most successful public transportation systems in the world, Colombia's TransMilenio project; to mayor Sergio Fajardo's decision that he would transform his violence-ridden city by building an infrastructure of public library parks in the slums of Medellín; and also even to Venezuelan Hugo Chávez's demagogic proclamations promising to give huge oil revenues to the poor of his country towards the formation of the new socialist city. All have become paradigmatic gestures during recent years.

Even though much has been written about these important realized projects in Latin America, there is still a lot of missing information. Most of the descriptions behind these projects focus on the achievements themselves, as final products, but very seldom, if not at all, can we find specific narrations that convey the sociopolitical and economic processes behind many of the transactions, exchanges and negotiations that took place across institutions and with the public to make these projects happen. In other words, beyond the images emerging from these success stories I have been seeking to understand the main sociopolitical and economic procedures behind many of these emblematic projects. While these processes of negotiation across institutions are natural to the institutions of planning, the stories behind these projects are much more complex, as these depended on generating new socioeconomic protocols that would in turn produce a new public domain.

There is not the space here to elaborate on the specificity of such procedures –an essential part of my research practice is in fact the retroactive mapping of the processes emerging from the global South, translating not their images, but their operative procedures so that those urban operations can enable public policy and activism in the US. But it is important to mention a couple of revelations that in my mind emerged from some of these projects and have been inspirational to my practice as an architect working on the border between Latin America and the US.

The revelations have to do primarily with identifying a couple of major conceptual strands that framed these models of possibility: an investment in urban pedagogy – the transfer of knowledge across governments and publics – and the pursuit of a civic culture and social justice as the basis for an inclusive urbanization.

One major idea that is seldom discussed about these projects is the way in which they informed each other, from Brazil to Colombia. There is an exchange of knowledge taking place across successive governments, from federal to municipal, learning from one another and in so doing refining the tactics and strategies of the other. It is impossible, for example, to think of the success story of Enrique Peñalosa's TransMilenio bus rapid transit system in Bogotá without the lessons transferred from ex-mayor Jamie Lerner's experiments with public transportation in Curitiba, whereby retrofitted existing roads were retrofitted to eliminate cars, allowing an uninterrupted flow of buses that would operate as a metro system on the surface by also producing elevated bus stations so as to increase the accessibility and time frequency of the system. Peñalosa took these urban logics to another level of refinement and complexity in TransMilenio by layering it with other infrastructural categories, enabling a system of transfers to move across different scales of mobility, from pedestrian to bicycle to bus, and interconnecting a network of public spaces, libraries and housing projects, between the centre and the periphery of the city, between enclaves of wealth and sectors of informality. In turn, this experience ended up informing ex-mayor Sergio Fajardo in the creation of Library-Parks, a very unique typology of public space he injected into the slums around Medellín, as an antidote to fight violence with education.

Another major aspect behind this transfer of knowledge that ultimately enabled the type of critical interfaces between governments, from the top down, and social activism, from the bottom up, is the fact that all of these projects began with a committed investment in education at the scale of the metropolitan: an urban pedagogy that would close the gap between institutions and publics. The success of the Participatory Budgets policy in Porto Alegre depended on the formation of a civic culture, where the dissemination of information across community activists would enable a citizen-led political will that intensified public participation in the distribution of economic resources at the scale of communities. The visualization and democratization of information became the tool to enable this public policy. Similarly, Jamie Lerner in Curitiba famously rallied the elementary schools of the city to lead a pedagogical project towards environmental sustainability, which would be guided by children putting pressure on their parents to become accountable for recycling. Learning from many of these precedents, one of the most effective campaigns elaborating on the relationship between urban pedagogy and the formation of a civic culture that would enable a very different idea of public spending and infrastructure occurred years later in Bogotá.

Former mayor of Bogotá Antanas Mockus led one of the most comprehensive public policies to promote a civic imagination, by enacting idiosyncratic public legislature inclusive of social activism. A fundamental reorganization of social systems occurred here that capitalized on the creative intelligence of communities and activists, mobilizing mutual support and volunteerism in the shape of citizen-led collaborations to face the most pressing urban problems in the contemporary city, including violence, political apathy, social indifference, environmental degradation and lack of economic resources. This massive mobilization of the citizenry allowed the most intangible of factors in the shaping of the next urban revolution to enter the collective imaginary: that communities themselves can, in fact, be participants in the shaping of the city of the future and that the identity of this city is based not on the dominance of private development alone and its exorbitant budgets to sponsor the image of progress, but it can also emerge from the value of social capital and incremental layering of urban development, enabling a more inclusive idea of ownership.

So successful did this campaign of strengthening a civil society in order to reduce urban violence become that it prompted the willing participation of particular socioeconomic sectors to 'pay-as-you-want' capital contributions that would increase the city's tax base for enabling urban infrastructural improvements. It is very seldom discussed, but it is this fundamental reframing of sociopolitical and economic protocols that enabled the materialization of Peñalosa's vision in shaping the TransMilenio project. Similarly, Antanas Mockus built upon the intelligent work of previous administrations that had begun to shape by the early 1980s a comprehensive progressive political document, a conceptual scaffold for dealing with Colombia's anticipated urban growth, called POT, the Territorial Organizing Plan. This document was founded conceptually on issues pertaining to complexity theory sprinkled with progressive politics, aspiring to a civic humanism based on the Rights to the City movement. This document and its subsequent iterations have framed many of these achievements, moving from the large scale of the territory all the way to the scale of neighborhoods and communities, connecting the abstraction of large planning logics with the specificity of everyday practices within communities.

Sergio Fajardo enabled this level of specificity when designing a policy that would redefine the conventional idea of public space at the scale of community. His famous Library-Parks in Medellín opened the critique that our conception of public space is too abstract and neutral: the naive idea that if we simply design a nice looking plaza we would magically assure socialization. Instead, he proposed levels of specificity by injecting tactical programming into open space. Each park or public space in this city would be plugged with pedagogical support systems hybridizing social space with knowledge. This was a powerful message, in my



mind, that moved the discussion from the neutrality of public infrastructure to the specificity of urban rights: the radical democratization of space by enabling access and concrete civic rights to diverse publics and communities.

The translation of these processes into new urban paradigms that can be replicated at other scales and even with different sociopolitical actors is an essential point of departure for my work. The conceptual legacy of these projects and the sense of possibility they engender to produce a different approach to a more democratic form of urban development, away from the selfish recipes of urbanization that have permeated the world in the last two decades, have inspired the transformation of my practice in recent years, as I have been researching the impact of the Latin American immigrants in the transformation of many US neighborhoods, using the US–Mexico border as a laboratory to rethink affordable housing and infrastructure.

Seeking expanded models of architecture practice and a new role for the arts and humanities in shaping new public policy is the primary effort we need to engage in these times of crises. In this context, it is very telling that many of the visionary mayors in Latin America discussed briefly here have, in fact, come from the arts and the humanities, such as Mockus and Fajardo, for example, who are both philosophers and mathematicians, and Lerner is an architect. When asked about their move from pedagogy into politics they usually respond that their incursion into the political arena sprang from a necessity to engage a new brand of progressive politics. Here they suggest that to engage the political is not to be a ‘politician’ but to enact a course of action.

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Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See Teddy Cruz, “Creative Acts of Citizenship,” Keynote address at *Design in Action* Conference, Friends Center, Philadelphia, October 10, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> See Liang Chen, “Ai Weiwei breaks his silence,” in *The Global Times*, August 9, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> See Laszlo Jakab Orsos, recording for *John Cage: How to Get Started*, Slought Foundation Archives, Sept 19, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> See the “Second Bill of Rights” as proposed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the then President of the United States, during his State of the Union Address on January 11, 1944.

<sup>v</sup> See the introduction by Aaron Levy and Eduardo Cadava to *Cities without Citizens* (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation and Rosenbach Museum, 2002).

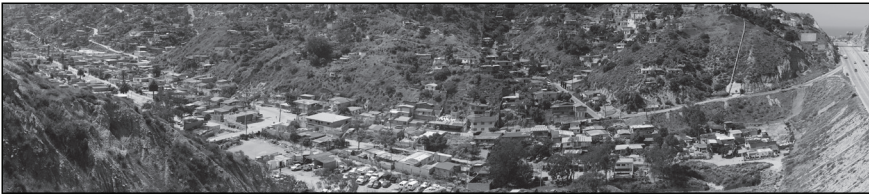
<sup>vi</sup> See Sigfried Gideon as quoted in Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), pg. 2-4.

<sup>vii</sup> See Dennis Oppenheim, Soundtrack to *Lecture #1*, 1974.

<sup>viii</sup> See Karl Marx’s alleged letter to his friend Edward Beesly in 1869 in which he remarks that “whoever drafts programs for the future is a reactionary,” as discussed by Eduardo Cadava in “The Promise of Emancipation” in *Evasions of Power: On the Architecture of Adjustment* (Slought Foundation, 2011).

### **Latin American Meander: In Search of a New Civic Imagination**

<sup>i</sup> This essay first published in “Special Issue: Latin America at the Crossroads,” *Architectural Design*, Volume 81, Issue 3, pages 110–118, May/June 2011.



Rethinking the impact of immigration

**“Density can be measured  
as an amount of social  
exchanges per acre.”**

— Teddy Cruz



Rethinking environmental sustainability and the social

**“A microbasin can be a way of  
constructing community.”**

— Oscar Romo

## Some Points for Thought

1. Something is WRONG → 30 years and going strong = NARCOTRAFIC.
2. Latin America → Unity
3. Legalization → towards
4. Public Health → Promotion + Prevention
5. New Challenges → Close the entrance door  
"Prevention of Violence"  
in ANTIOQUIA



Rethinking the political

**“Let’s build not where the votes are, but where the necessities are.”**

— Sergio Fajardo