Multimedia and Websites

This set of reviews explores the ecology of the contemporary city as it evolves beyond the capacities of the traditional disciplines of architecture, urban design, urban planning, and urban economics. Lagos, Caracas, and a postindustrial neighborhood in Barcelona offer a kind of preview of the future of the global city. In each case, the underclass struggle for occupable space and economic viability redefines every aspect of urban form and life. New forms of filmmaking have been developed to analyze and potentially contribute to the ongoing negotiation for social justice in a postindustrial city. Between the filmmakers and the citizens of this evolving city a new set of actors emerges, including urban activists, micro-entrepreneurs, and a kind of architect without borders, which constitutes a new form of expertise that needs to be studied.

BEATRIZ COLOMINA
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Rob Schröder, director
Caracas: The Informal City
Amsterdam: Submarine Channel, 2007, DVD, 49 min., €19.95

The documentary Caracas: The Informal City, produced in 2007 by the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO (Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio Omroep) and the third International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam, examines the rapid growth of Venezuela’s capital city, focusing on the proliferation of unregulated, self-built housing surrounding the metropolitan core. Directed by Rob Schröder, the fifty-minute DVD alternates between rapid-fire and reflective, seeking a juste milieu between the television viewer and the exhibition visitor by merging documentary interviews with the on-the-move and off-the-cuff style of the travelogue. The small film crew follows the architects Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumper—whose architectural practice Urban Think Tank (UTT) is based in Caracas—through the city’s complex and not easily accessible barrios. Traveling by helicopter, car, motorbike, and foot, the city is viewed through its fringes, overpasses, highways, back alleys, and terrains vagues, where in the absence of a master plan the city has grown of its own accord over the last several decades. We see Caracas through the lens of Schröder’s camera, but just as forcefully through the discourse of Brillembourg and Klumper, who appear alternately as architects looking to transform the barrio, detectives seeking to read its signs, journalists hunting for its story, spokesmen for its inhabitants, propagandists for its contemporary relevance, and subjects examined in their own right.

As Brillembourg explains at the outset of the film, the Caracas of the 1950s was a city buoyed by oil wealth and was a magnet for regional migration, but one in which only a small fraction of the population lived in squatter settlements. Over the following fifty years, Caracas’s population would increase sixfold, becoming a city in which nearly sixty percent of the urban population lives in unregulated, unplanned, self-constructed settlements. While the topic is hardly new to architects and planners, the DVD arrives on the heels of a significant uptick in interest regarding such settlements and the role they are playing in the rapid formation of megacities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Following the United Nations’ landmark publication The Challenge of the Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements (2003), books such as Brillembourg and Klumper’s own The Informal City: Caracas Case (New York: Prestel, 2005), Mike Davis’s Planet of Slums (New York: Verso, 2007), and Rem Koolhaas’s Lagos: How It Works (Baden: Lars Müller, 2007), among others, have examined the phenomenal growth of slums in the global south in a manner accessible to a range of disciplines beyond the specialized world of development studies. The recent surge in publications has also been marked by the formation of new terms: in UTT’s case the guiding concept is that of the “informal city.” As an alternative to the stigmatized connotation of slums, the informal focuses upon the emergence of a different kind of urban form within the apparent chaos of unplanned, spontaneous accumulation. The notion of the informal also consolidates a shift in attitude, an openness to and validation of the improvised, casual, and transitory survival strategies developed within such settlements. Yet the concept, recent in coinage, was initially developed to describe neither the settlement patterns nor the constructive practices they contain, but was rather a designation for the economic sector that falls outside of the monitoring and regulation of the state, a sector within which many of the inhabitants of such settlements earn their living. The migration of informality from economics to architecture and urbanism remains up for grabs. If the notion of the informal draws attention to the inventiveness and intelligence of self-organizing phenomena, it could also be argued that an overly formal attention to these strategies obscures the formative causes of inequality within the global economy. Propelled by a sense of urgency, Caracas: The Informal City and its main protagonists are not overly preoccupied with theoretical definitions, yet through their site visits and conversations with inhabitants, the DVD provides an
image both of Caracas and of the discourse on the informal city.

Throughout the film the architects tackle back and forth, treading a careful line between enthusiasm and realism. Brillembourg remarks: “It’s not that we’re glorifying the informal city; it’s not that we think it is positive, this wild, chaotic urbanism. It’s that we’ve understood that it is our reality, the reality of the developing world. There is not enough money, and for political reasons, there is not a consensus, so how can the architect work?” The DVD presents a number of possible answers, some in the form of projects and hypotheses, others in the form of interventions realized within the dense urban fabric of Caracas. The first responses appear in the instrumental mode, as a series of interventions designed for barrio inhabitants. The most developed is the Vertical Gymnasium, a replicable prototype for an urban sports facility. Inverting the model of vertical living and horizontal recreation in order to respond to the lack of open areas in the dense barrios, the Vertical Gymnasium takes the demand for sport and recreation, and seeks to create space for it by stacking soccer, volleyball, and basketball facilities, along with a running track and open areas for fitness classes, within the envelope of a vertical steel cage. As Leopold Lopez, Mayor of Chacao, the neighborhood where the prototype is located, explains, the activity space provided by the Vertical Gymnasium also aspires to serve as a magnet drawing youth away from the elevated levels of crime in Caracas.

Other interventions are infrastructural in nature, addressing the connections to electricity, water, and sewage, which remain a central problem in many barrios. The dry-toilet, developed by Liyat Esakov, Marjetica Potrc, and UTT in the community of La Vega, is a modest prototype designed for the barrios that are at the highest elevations and where connections with municipal water and sewage are the least available. The Spartan toilet and shower unit uses standard local materials and solves the lack of connection with municipal sewage by composting its own refuse and collecting rainwater for showers. To the film’s credit, Caracas: The Informal City does not try to conceal the difficulties with even the simplest seeming of interventions: as an interview with one of the inhabitants reveals, the facility has already begun to deteriorate. Klumpner promises to fix the problem, yet the passage speaks to more than the awkwardness of good intentions gone awry. The banality of this breakdown is symptomatic of a key constraint of the informal city: the problem of designing for an environment that by definition lacks any public authority that can secure, maintain, and repair such infrastructural additions.

The film’s more subtle interventions are not in the form of building, but in the analyses of the urban situation made by UTT. Drawing appears as the key tool; in a series of segments in the film the architects are shown mapping out the spatial patterns of the informal settlements in Caracas. Their analysis of the “growing house” typology details the remarkably uniform procedures and materials through which informal housing propagates itself in barrio construction. Contrasted with the restless movement of the camera in the city, such confrontations with the page are a moment of abstraction in which the architects’ reading of the situation becomes most clear. Economics, policy, and population have understandably dominated the burgeoning research into unplanned urban growth, but if these studies are long on statistics, figures, and charts, they often lack resolution when it comes to the particulars of the urban fabric. With a grasp of the differences and details of the built environment, Brillembourg and Klumpner’s reading of the
materials and spatial patterns of the city dispel the idea that informal cities are an expression of chaos, helping to discern the forms of order at work within the inform-alization of urban space.

Brillembourg and Klumppner ultimately argue that the future of the architect within such a scenario is as an agent capable of linking bottom-up initiatives with those originating from the top down. Often this takes the form of partnering with community activists, such as Luis Zerpa, who is working with the architects toward the realization of a Vertical Gymnasium in his community, or with Felix Caraballa, who has cleaned up a former trash dump in order reclaim the precious space for a community center. In both cases, the architecture of this relationship appears to be less a customized design for community needs, than developing basic prototypes that can be locally appropriated and adapted, navigating bureaucracy, and helping to channel flows of capital. Inspir-ing as such examples are, Caracas: The Informal City does not push very hard on the increasingly common shorthand terms bottom-up and top-down. What in fact constitutes the top-down in such informal urban conditions remains the most mysterious. With the exception of Mayor Lopez— whose role in the project is never specified—we do not meet any of officials, developers, or stakeholders who might be at the upper end of the continuum, nor do we get a sense of who has funded the realized projects.

Caracas: The Informal City spends more time with the inhabitants and activists of various barrios, which reveals how non-uniform the category of “bottom-up” is. The inform-alization of cities is a process with its own distinct gender dynamics, and while the viewer catches glimpses of such gender dynamics in the film, the question is never tackled directly. Indeed part of the trouble lies in the particular documentary strategy used in Caracas: The Informal City; while a number of women are interviewed in the film, unlike the men they remain nameless, and the questions they are asked are limited to their domestic environments and the construction of their homes. Throughout the film we encounter inhabitants who are often treated more as objects than interlocutors, a pattern that resembles outsized manners of ethno-graphic filmmaking.

Indeed, the question of “bottom-up” developments in Venezuela is especially fraught politically. President Hugo Chavez’s “Bolivarian Revolution” stresses alliances with a variety of self-organized groups, portraying itself as a product of a larger mass movement. Critics of Chavez have charged that some of these self-organizing groups, such as the Bolivarian Circles, are in fact disguised militias. Caracas: The Informal City treads a fine line, raising the subject of Chavez’s poli-tics while avoiding confronting such con-flicting interpretations head on. We learn little, for instance, about the government’s current initiatives or urban policies, or how Chavez’s strategies of nationalization have affected everyday life in the informal city. There prevails a lingering sense of disconnection between the overwhelming presence of informal urbanism (visible in the macroscopic, aerial views that punctu-ate the film) and a sense of the significance of such urban form for the inhabitants within it. Such questions become most palpable in the carefully framed panora-mas of dense agglomerations that fill the entire frame, allowing the viewer to grasp the vast and irregular pattern, while pro-viding just enough proximity and resolu-tion to discern the outlines of houses, windows, and streets. Set to the sounds of the Caracas-based hip-hop group Area 23, such aerial views establish a parallel between the global phenomenon of hip-hop and that of the informal city. Iron-ically, Area 23 take their name from 23 de Enero, Caracas’s largest and most significant postwar mass-housing project, con-ceived by the architect Carlos Raul Villanueva as part of a very formal master plan developed for the Banco Obrero Housing Program in the1950s. The archi-tects and the film crew visit the housing complex, which has become a particularly complicated node in the relationship between the formal and informal city. If the informal city appropriates the infra-structure and the open ground within the site plan of 23 de Enero in order to expand and service itself, the towers retain a commanding position over the neighbor-hood as well as its political and social life. The towers, we learn, are where many local leaders of groups such as the Tupa-

maros and the Coordinadora Simon Bolivar reside; they are vestiges of the armed opposition groups who have become supporters of the Chavez government. Inside one of the towers an interviewee (who is not named, but is identified as a former urban guerilla) explains how the group has now exchanged its guns for books. The exact nature of this transformation is never made explicit, and the viewer is left with a sense that much has been left unspoken. It is but one of a number of points in the film that capture a sense of uneasiness on behalf of the interviewees and inhabitants who are filmed. Such moments could easily have been edited out, yet to the film’s credit their inclusion provides an important sense of the tension lurking at the edges of such encounters.

At the end of the DVD, we hear the director ask from off camera why Caracas still feels to him like so much chaos. Klumppner replies that the idea of the ordered city is a myth, safely guarded by city halls around the world. The point is worth pondering, a caveat against equating informality with chaos, but equally against seeing the processes of informal-ization solely as a phenomenon of the developing world. On the other hand, the claim that order is only a myth risks downplaying the real challenges of informality at a deeper level, as a struggle between governmentality and those forces that elude it, whether by design or neg-l ect. To its credit, Caracas: The Informal City contains many moments and places where informality is grasped precisely as such a relationship: between towers and barrios, between topographical differences and the cost of goods, between service and served, between the freedom to move and the demand for protection. It is in articulating such relationships that the film makes the strongest case for comprehending the particularity of Caracas’ urban and architectural logics, and in so doing con-tributes to a finer-grained comprehension of this important global phenomenon.

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