The Struggle for Urban Space

Jacobo Sucari, scriptwriter and director

La lucha por el espacio urbano (The Struggle for Urban Space)


Jacobo Sucari’s The Struggle for Urban Space, produced for Catalonia Television, focuses on the transformation of the old Poble Nou industrial neighborhood in Barcelona and could be a mirror for many of today’s global cities. In the documentary Sucari responds to both his own constant inquiry into collective memory of the weak and hidden traces left on history by the lives of anonymous persons, and to a singular social moment being lived by some of the citizens of Barcelona. The film interfaces the search for a nearly erased memory of a place and the real-time experience of that process of erasing.

As the filmmaker explains, “The Struggle for Urban Space is a documentary reflecting on the violent changes generated by the new forms of urban development on the landscape and its inhabitants. It is, in fact, a change that can be seen in many European cities due to the transformation . . . from industrial production to services production, and to the so-called information society”; it shows “transformations of production and of capital investments that are reflected in a new ordering of old factory neighborhoods and the displacement of their populations.” Today this territorial reordering proposed in Poble Nou by public powers, far from being a limited project, has generated a major struggle among the diverse interests that converge in its space, including private capital, mixed public/private capital, neighborhood associations, and other groups and individuals who are successfully voicing their positions against the proposed changes.

The documentary has a continuity of drama and plot while presenting confrontations of diverse parallel viewpoints that are experienced by those close to this convulsed territory. The final outcome of the conflict surrounding Poble Nou is still uncertain; development and growth models, based on an idea of “progress” linked to investment of financial capital, have been questioned, and alternative models have been proposed by citizens’ associations. In summary, Poble Nou reflects its traumatic passage from an industrial society to an information society.

The Struggle for Urban Space is a current account of the clashes over the destiny of an urban district—the modernization of the city and the industrial fabric, understood as a fictitious media event, versus a concept of modernity that is more related to the local, the inherited, and the future potential of the place, its heritage, and its inhabitants, in a way that would add layers of complexity of urban life. Unfortunately, as this documentary shows, in Poble Nou complexity has been eliminated, and the proposed space is sanitized and homogenized.

Sucari renders this late-modern and late-capitalist global struggle around the city polyhedrally, through various players, experiences, and voices. Two stories form common threads in this complex and diverse choral portrait. One, which is imbued with a certain nostalgia for a bygone era, is that of an old militant anarchist, who recounts his past during a stroll through his devastated neighborhood. This character is a clear reference to the historian who sits in an empty lot in the Wim Wenders film The Sky over Berlin (1987). The second story, that of the visual artist Pep Dardanyà, the director’s alter ego, provides a critical presence, as the artist delivers his own goodbye to the neighborhood because he has been forced out by the urbanistic appropriation of his work space. Dardanyà tours the neighborhood, interviewing workers and residents, while reflecting on how he feels estranged from its new architecture. The sequences devoted to this sensation of uneasiness that derives from the new buildings, especially Jean Nouvel’s AGBAR Tower, reflect especially well this reviewer’s own feelings about the transformation of the global city. Just as the critical voice of the past is primarily—but not exclusively—that of the anarchist historian, it unfurls chorially in the documentary in different characters and visions.

Sucari’s initial intention was to paint the neighborhood’s general transformation as a consequence of the globalization of urbanistic practice and the shaping of cities. As his research progressed, he focused on
recounting one paradigmatic case: the citizenry’s struggle to defend the neighborhood’s Can Ricart industrial complex. One is in the first person, and its protagonists, an anarchist historian and an artist, are affected directly by the urban changes in the neighborhood. The other voice fluctuates between those of individuals and a collective voice—of the neighborhood and the city in general—responding to the Can Ricart issue. Individual experiences give shape to a collective neighborhood mosaic and combine to define a common element.

By giving the floor to very diverse players, Sucari records the critical and combative awakening of individual and collective citizens, their origins, and their associations and memberships. Such a reaction was not expected in an apparently self-satisfied and self-complacent model city such as Barcelona, where an urban renewal project called 22@Barcelona has been put forward as an innovative proposal for the future.

Urban renovation, according to its defenders, technical experts, and politicians in municipal government, seeks to transform an abandoned, dirty, and polluting industrial district into a district for new technologies. On paper, the old and the new would be added together, and different realities and eras of production would live side by side. Sucari gives a leading role to how this ideal of urban renewal—whose practice has been quite different from its theory—is beginning to be contested by an awakening urban social movement that unites very diverse sectors of the population.

In 2008 at Caixaforum in Barcelona, Sucari presented a second stage of his work, the expanded three-screen documentary The City Transformed (La ciudad transformada), where confrontation and dialogue are temporally presented in unison and not sequentially, allowing for other readings, interpretations, and relationships. This work takes a symbolic leap, launching the two-dimensional frame of television or cinema into space, where the spectator’s path weaves another sort of relationship with the subject. It is a format where narrative multiplicity and random access to information have a strong impact, in the processes of both documentary representation and receiving and elaborating the information by viewers, who thus become active agents of interpretation. An interactive browser on Can Ricart complemented the exhibition, so the spectator could access an ongoing update on the conflict and explore the its evolution and history. The original television documentary shows a temporal cross-section that this information complements. In that earlier version, even while allowing all the actors to speak on equal footing and without judging, Sucari gives more time to the critical voices, making the protagonist the group of squatters that has long been linked to the complex’s defense, and who were the last ones to occupy it. Despite seeking to be a narrator and not a judge, in the television version Jacobo Sucari gives a bigger role to the critical voices, placing himself closer to the citizenry. In the expanded three-screen documentary, the voices are extended, and those who defend and explain the municipal action have more space and are positioned in a long-distance dialogue with other protagonists. The three screens always show us three characters: two persons recounting from different perspectives the change taking place in this sector of the city, and in the center the physical changes to the urban space, the tracks being traced on the territory, play the role of a third character.

The documentary was shown in other cities, with their own territorial conflicts, demonstrating how this story is shared by so many in different cities. In 2008 Sucari presented the documentary at the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem cinematechs, attracting young local architects unhappy with transformation projects taking place in their cities. For Israelis who did not know how to confront such destructive urban plans, the documentary showed how Barcelona had permitted alternative action. There was a similar result at the 2007 Malaga Film Festival, where the documentary went both to the official event and to a parallel off-Malaga festival. It was also invited to film festivals and architectural forums in Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina.

A city’s construction is a choral creation not exempt from conflict. For professionals in the world of architecture, including practitioners, teachers, and historians, the documentary clarifies the need...
to change those professional roles. There is an increasing need for dialogue, interpretation, and mediation among professionals, and the idea of the architect’s work as a loftily enlightened and despotic creation is increasingly unsustainable; the documentary plays a key role in introducing the complexity of urban forces and players that must be taken into account in urban projects.

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Notes
2. I had the privilege of being contacted by Jacobo Sucari when he began filming the documentary, in connection with some texts of mine he had read and that were in line with his position. From that interest came my own connection to the film. My texts are La arquitectura de la ciudad global (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2004) and “Privatización del espacio público: Diagonal Mar, Barcelona,” in Jordi Borja, ed., La ciudad conquistada (Madrid: Alianza, 2003).
3. For a real-time open communication and information platform on the Can Ricart conflict, see http://canricart.info (accessed 5 May 2009).
4. 22@Barcelona is an urban renewal project that seeks to transform two hundred hectares of industrial land into a new technology industrial zone. At the beginning of the project, it was seen as an opportunity to upgrade the whole neighborhood, creating a mixed-use and dense area, joining new activities to the existing ones. Nowadays, more than seven years after it was presented, the inhabitants are feeling defeated. Strange and new buildings have been built, but only a few for daily life. Instead, large corporative structures were installed there with no relation to the place—a kind of generic and global city growth that erases much of the identity of the place. See http://www.22barcelona.com (accessed 5 May 2009).
5. For a real-time open communication and information platform on the Can Ricart conflict, created and coordinated by Josep Saldàna, see http://canricart.info (accessed 5 May 2009).

Bregtje van der Haak, director
Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City

That is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos.1—Rem Koolhaas

Lagos, the former capital city of Nigeria, was for Rem Koolhaas an ideal case study for examining what happens when urban planning fails in a metropolis long expected to collapse under its immense weight but that has remained surprisingly resilient and dramatically alive. Skeptical of city planning in the early 1990s, and in need of a site where his skepticism could be tested, Koolhaas found Lagos attractive because while there were traces of systematic organization in the form of extensive roadways and bridges constructed decades ago, what kept the city going and what marked it out as perhaps the model future city were the self-organizing, unregulated entities and spaces whose existence depended on the city’s notorious structural dysfunctionality. It is the logic of these zones of organized autonomy within the larger scheme of unruly, apocalyptic urbanization that the film Lagos Wide & Close: An Interactive Journey into an Exploding City by Bregtje van der Haak takes as its subject. This film is a documentary on Koolhaas’s adventure into one of the ten most populous cities—a city that is mysterious because of its dearth of systematic accounts and forbidding by the proliferation of its dreadful news. Much of the film’s material was generated in the course of the Koolhaas-directed Harvard Project on the City research on Lagos, part of an ambitious, multicity study motivated by the desire to come to terms with the processes of massive, runaway urbanization and its implications on architecture and urban planning.

Van der Haak shares with Koolhaas the curiosity to understand how a city like Lagos works. She combines video footage and Koolhaas’s commentary with the voices of eight inhabitants of Lagos who in various ways participate in the production and sustenance of the self-organizing entities so crucial to the architect’s theory of Lagosian urbanism.2 However, Wide & Close is not obsessed with producing a narrative account of the city. Rather it paints an incisive, witty, yet impressionistic and unfinished portrait of Lagos, although the resulting picture ultimately tells the viewer more about what makes aspects of the city work, and in some ways heightens the mysteriousness of Lagos, perhaps the world’s biggest unknown metropolis.

Shorn of any overriding narrative, one crucial subplot in the film is a fragmentary account of a day in the life of Olawole Busayo, a resident of Mushin in the Lagos mainland.3 Busayo works twelve hours a day, six days a week driving a danfo—one of Lagos’s ubiquitous yellow minibuses—along the Ojulegba-Oshodi-Ikeja routes and struggles mightily to earn enough to pay for the bus rental and to support his wife and young child. The film begins in a dark street, possibly in Mushin, lit only by the filmmaker’s harsh lights. As it sweeps through the scene, it illuminates a saturnine scene of fast-paced pedestrians, a street-side food vendor, children fetching water from a well, and vehicular traffic, including a danfo, possibly Busayo’s own, heading off for the day’s work. In a sense, this opening scene sets up the underlying theme of the film: the failure of planning and infrastructure (evident in the badly paved street, and absence of electricity and potable water) and residents carrying on with their lives in spite of their depressing living conditions.

The camera follows the bus, then pans out from this close shot to a wide overhead, then aerial view of streets, bridges, chaotic bus terminals, narrow streets densely hedged by big houses with rusting tin roofs, and roads clogged by endless lines of static yellow buses. In his running commentary, against the background of street noise, Koolhaas explains his motivation for studying Lagos: his curiosity about a metropolis largely unknown to the West and apparently disconnected from global networks. Toward the end of the film we see Busayo at the Alpha Beach on a Sunday evening enjoying his drink and beachside noise with friends. At one point a youth approaches the camera, declaring