

From:
Los Carpinteros
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LOS CARPINTEROS, *Ciudad Transportable*, 2000. Installation view, 7th Havana Biennial, Havana, Cuba.

Placeless Place

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Intense differences exist between urban centers and city topographies around the globe, particularly evident in the disparities between developing countries and advanced capitalist nations. While it is untenable to put forth a singular, universalizing image of the city, it is important to note the tensions between the desire to create generic codes and the imperative to acknowledge the idiosyncratic conditions of the local. How, on architectural and urban terms, is the *location* of the local articulated in an increasingly transcultural world? What if local architectural vernacular could be articulated as a universal design phenomenon, and the universal understood as a symptom of the local? These may not be entirely new questions, but they have taken on greater urgency as artists have begun to probe such issues in more sophisticated ways.

As part of his life-long examination of the linkages between space, knowledge and power, Michel Foucault developed the concept of ‘heterotopias’ (‘other places’). In conjunction with utopias, heterotopias have the peculiar quality of relating to all places but “in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected or mirrored by themselves.”¹ Foucault called heterotopias those places whose location, paradoxically, lies *outside* of all places, and that function like “counter-arrangements, an effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements ... are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned.”²

If one is to inject philosophy or theory into the context of a meditation on art, it is tenable here to suggest a fortuitous (albeit inadvertent) convergence between Foucault’s notion of heterotopia and a particular work by Los Carpinteros. Some five years ago, Los Carpinteros began imagining a city without fixed geographical markers, and *Ciudad Transportable (Transportable City)* was subsequently erected within—and against—the Havana urban landscape in late 2000. True to its vocation, this conceptually nomadic (and nomadically conceptual) work has since traveled to geographically diverse urban centers such as New York, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Shanghai.

Spectacularly bordered by the Bahía de La Habana on one side, and the castle El Moro on the other, the first installation of *Ciudad Transportable* was comprised of ten structures scattered across a lawn. The formal construction of the structures indexed the artists’ professed longtime fascination with the formal codes of camping tent technology. Manufactured in khaki synthetic fabric and aluminum tubing (with zippers allowing access to the interior and with transparent plastic as windows), every aspect of the tents’ design facilitated an effortless set up, dismantling, and re-packing. The design of each tent-like structure referenced a specific source culled from a typology of actual buildings; this iconography corresponded to, and distilled into a quasi-universal form, those real-world edifices that reflected the artists’ idea of what is an essential institutional framework for a modern urban society.

“*Ciudad Transportable* is about the basic minimum that a person or a society needs to function. We wanted to create the basic cell of what a city could be.”³

Los Carpinteros’ overall practice is marked by an ongoing series of parallel works, of which *Ciudad Transportable* is of central operational importance. Other projects such as *Glass Towers* (2002), *Downtown*,⁴ *Transportable Columns* (2001), *Prison* (2003), *FOCSA* (2002) and *Filled Pool* (2001) are

distinctly related to it. *Ciudad Transportable*, however, expands upon and consolidates the group's preoccupation with the signifying possibilities of a representational language that is transmitted and understood, ironically, through the codes of an abstracted architectural lexicon.

“Our work studies quotidian objects and its functions. Many of our pieces derive from the alteration or the exaggeration of the use of a piece of furniture or another element that we habitually use. We have discovered that, hidden in the functionality of things that man fabricates, lie many fissures that betray his thoughts and conduct.”⁵

At once fascinated by, and skeptical of, the normative institutional workings of architecture and design, in *Ciudad Transportable* Los Carpinteros both adopt and deny the Beaux-Arts vocation of the building types that they symbolically re-present. As tents, their appearance no longer announces a definitive real-world functionality, although it fulfills the function of providing, to the viewer, an immediately readable architectonic text. In contrast to the aesthetics of precariousness inherent to the idea of producing a work of art in the form of (or as) a tent, Los Carpinteros's work indicates an aesthetic, or ethos, akin to packaging and consumer culture. Perhaps, in a sense, they are suggesting that the language of survival itself (as in a tent city) has become increasingly interdependent with systems of design and production characteristic of mass culture.

“Buildings are very flexible things. Some have such an obviously functional appearance, like the capitol, whose appearance provides information about this functionality. Others, like the hospital, however, are a little more introverted. Its plan is a cross, like the Red Cross, and it has many windows to maximize light. The military building is inspired by fortresses that have tilted walls to deflect the impact of projectiles, and narrow windows to hold guns. For the church, we chose to make a religious temple that, in other circumstances, could be used by different faiths.”⁶

As of now, only the first ten buildings in Los Carpinteros' typology have been realized: the factory, the Gothic-like church, the hospital, the military outpost, the university, the domed capitol, the lighthouse, the prison, the warehouse, and the residential apartment building. The artists have left open the possibility that other structures will be added in the future.

Mobile in scope and temporary by nature, tents inexorably carry with them notions of refuge and survival. Existing half way between personal clothing and

architectural edifice, the protection of the body is central to their *raison d'être*, with all the connotations of regression that this invokes. Uniformly dressed in quasi-military fashion, *Ciudad Transportable* evokes a range of incompatible associations that resist coming together through easy resolution: militarism and tourism; discipline and laxity; security and destitution; dwelling and displacement; the playfulness of playground architecture.



Los Carpinteros. *Capitolio*, 2000, aluminum and nylon, 11 1/2 x 19 3/4 x 7 1/2 feet.

According to the artists, there were two options for scale systems: “One was to build the camping tents to the scale of real buildings. The other was to reduce the prototypes of traditional buildings to the scale of camping tents or military hospitals. The second was the most logical option, since we wanted to create a type of city that would serve any group of people that see themselves forced to abandon their places, their buildings, their surroundings for whatever existing reasons.”⁷ The leveling implicit in the homogeneous scale of the tents implies a de-hierarchization not only among the buildings and institutions represented, but also in the relation between people and buildings. In *Ciudad Transportable*, these heavy structures regain human scale, and allow for a different kind of imaginary inhabitation to occur.

In recent years, certain artists have become increasingly involved with the poetics of mobility and the aesthetics of the transient, and have addressed the transitory nature of what we understand as home by literally recreating and re-

contextualizing such domestic spaces in different public spheres. For instance, Rirkrit Tiravanija reconstructed his New York apartment and offered it for unrestricted public use at the Cologne Kunstverein, and at New York gallery. Other examples come to mind, such as Rachel Whiteread's castings of entire buildings and rooms, Do-Ho Suh's diaphanous replica of his home in translucent pastel fabric, Lucy Orta's *Life Nexus Village* and modular architecture, Andrea Zittel's portable living units and vehicles, to name a few. While these works speak to the much-acknowledged expansion of itinerancy, and the quasi-nomadic conditions that epitomize certain contemporary urban centers, they also effectively counteract a traditional tendency to understand space as fixed and lifeless.

Deeply rooted in the landscape and social memory of their birthplace, Los Carpinteros surreptitiously evoke their country's struggle to overcome the deterioration of its institutions and infrastructure, while also reflecting the playful and improvisational imagination pervasive in Cuba. Imbedded in their practice is an undercurrent of references, accessible in varying degrees depending on the viewer's social, ideological and geographical location. Although nearly all of *Ciudad Transportable* was implicitly modeled on specific buildings in Havana, its meanings are not locked up within stagnant polarities of local and global, vernacular versus universal architecture.

“Havana is a very universal city, with many architectural styles, almost all imported. For example, the capitol in Havana is a copy of the capitol in Washington. When it was time to make our *Ciudad Transportable*, what we had in hand was Havana ... However, it was not our intention to make a reproduction of Havana, or of any other specific city.”⁸

Despite its problems, Cuba still exists in the imagination of some as a utopian island, the last revolutionary bastion, the ultimate place of resistance. Yet a related kind of social spatiality within which to consider Cuba, and by (metonymic) extension, Havana, and its apparent doppelganger, *Ciudad Transportable*, could prove more useful. When set, as it were, against the Havana skyline, *Ciudad Transportable* invited a reading as a city within a city, at once an appendix and something removed. As in Foucault's heterotopias, it conjured a “mythical and real contestation of the space in which we live.”⁹ Against that original backdrop, *Ciudad Transportable* proposed an unprecedented expansion of Los Carpinteros' strategies of representation. Rather than existing, and being understood, primarily within an art context as their previous works had been, this piece stood in direct confrontation with the urban space, which made palpable its reflections, simultaneously upon the city and of the city, bringing together mental construction and physical form. *Ciudad Transportable* might be understood, in

the words of the artists themselves, as “a multi-use prototype that carries meaning according to the sites and circumstances.”¹⁰⁻

In *Ciudad Transportable*, we can discern what might be described as a *heterotopic proposition*: i.e., a constellation of quasi-referential structures that indicate a complex aesthetic and political negotiation between local architectural vernacular and global urban discourse. Los Carpinteros offer a new imaginary, a hybrid of architectonic and archetypal language, that plays in a mutable territory between the pragmatic and the impossible.

Notes:

1. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 352.
2. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 352.
3. Los Carpinteros quoted in Carol S. Eliel, *Los Carpinteros’s Transportable City* (exhibition brochure). Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001, n.p..
4. *Downtown* is an accumulation of modern buildings of approximately 3 meters high, all made in wood like beautifully finished furniture where each apartment is a drawer or a door.
5. Los Carpinteros in email communication with the author, July 28, 2003.
6. Los Carpinteros in email communication with the author, July 28, 2003.
7. Los Carpinteros in email communication with the author, July 28, 2003.
8. Los Carpinteros in email communication with the author, July 28, 2003.
9. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Places: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 353.
10. Los Carpinteros in email communication with the author, July 28, 2003.