

LEARNING FROM CARACAS

Urban-Think Tank on reactivating European cities

Experience comes in handy when devising architectural solutions for dire situations. The founding partners at interdisciplinary design practice Urban-Think Tank have devoted themselves to high-level research and design on a variety of subjects concerned with contemporary architecture and urbanism. The aim is to deliver innovative yet practical solutions by combining the skills of architects, civil engineers, environmental planners, landscape architects, and communication specialists. Working in global contexts, they create bridges between first-world industry and third-world urban areas. Having tackled Caracas, they delved into Athens. DAMN° interviewed the two gents to gather some wisdom that might lend itself to potential solutions for Europe's state of emergency.

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U-TT was inspired by the numerous challenges facing Athens and its residents, and focused on how spatial interventions at various scales could improve the city.





Many of the statements made by Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner from Urban-Think Tank at the opening of their current exhibition in Munich appear to be perfect slogans for unconventional and unusual methods. “We must stop competing and begin to cooperate”, declare the two professors from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (ETHZ). And with regard to their formative experience as architects in Venezuela, they summarise: “Caracas is everywhere.” But what exactly does this mean for Europe?

DAMN°: Your new book Reactivate Athens presents your recent participatory research on the Greek capital. Why Athens after Venezuela?

Alfredo Brillembourg: We decided to do a project in Europe and thought that Athens was by far the most interesting city, as of course it was already in crisis. Our research lasted more than two years. We set ourselves up as a kind of university design studio and then formed a local research lab and participatory platform in a temporary office and outreach space near Omonia Square, in the heart of the problematic part of Athens. A large percentage of buildings in the city centre are vacant. There are lots of car parks and fantastic buildings, but everything needs to be refurbished, reinvented, and relived. The book is about reactivating the city from below, on the basis of what is already there and on what people imagine for themselves now.

DAMN°: Do you have a concrete proposal?

AB: We collected and developed ideas that ranged in scale and in duration of implementation. One of the

Hubert Klumpner: Our book cover shows the typical New York paper coffee cup and offers a translation of its slogan “We are happy to serve you” in Greek. We see this as an urban design mentality, a paradigm for how architects and planners should think. Cities should serve people.



medium-term proposals addresses significant housing and vacancy issues connected to the *polykatoikias*. These typical housing blocks date from the speculative housing boom of the 1950s, when families gave their land to developers, who in turn agreed the number of apartments to subsequently build. The families then distributed their property among family members or sold off unnecessary units. But these polykatoikias have decayed. Nobody has maintained them, and the original apartment owners sublet, sublet, and sublet. Since the crisis, many tenants have been unable to pay rent, though the empty properties are still accruing high taxes. And there is no market for flats in Athens. We propose that a network of these apartment units be temporarily handed over to the government for a tax-free

period and duly transformed into subsidised dwellings. In return for receiving social housing – which doesn't otherwise exist in Athens – the beneficiaries would provide social services to elderly neighbours or others in need.

DAMN°: You say that Caracas is everywhere, does this mean that the circumstances in Athens are similar?

Hubert Klumpner: After World War II, Venezuela experienced the world's largest economic growth. It was actually the Dubai of the 1950s. “Caracas is everywhere” does not refer exclusively to present circumstances. Today the city is like Blade Runner in the tropics. It's characterised by skyrocketing crime and hyperinflation – a rather irritating, wild and crazy place. But it's also where non-simultaneity and simultaneity intersect. Caracas is not literally everywhere, though at a certain point in history it stood at the precise crossroads where many other cities now are, and we must synthesise what this means in today's context. After WWII, people in Munich lived in ruins. This provides a direction. We must adopt an optimistic view of the future and invest in the potential of cities and citizens. Opportunities will always arise, but we need to be prepared, to have an intelligent vision.

DAMN°: So your suggestion is to live more in the present and make the best of it?

HK: We have learned from informal cities and now need to work on the contemporary situation – to move towards a future that is possible. This is why we devise pilot projects and prototypical situations. For instance, the Bosnian Historical Museum in Sara-



jevo is still damaged from the war. Its director asked us what to do with a dilapidated museum. Tearing it down and creating a new venue is not an option, in our view. We suggested the opposite, to work with the building as it is and collaborate with new social initiatives. Our proposal is to start programming and broadcasting the museum's assets. It has no budget, but it does have an interesting collection. The idea is to stabilise the structure, repairing it to allow it to function. Remember, art and architecture are always targets in armed conflicts. A museum in Sarajevo can remind us to rebuild social spaces that thrive on culture and civic memory.

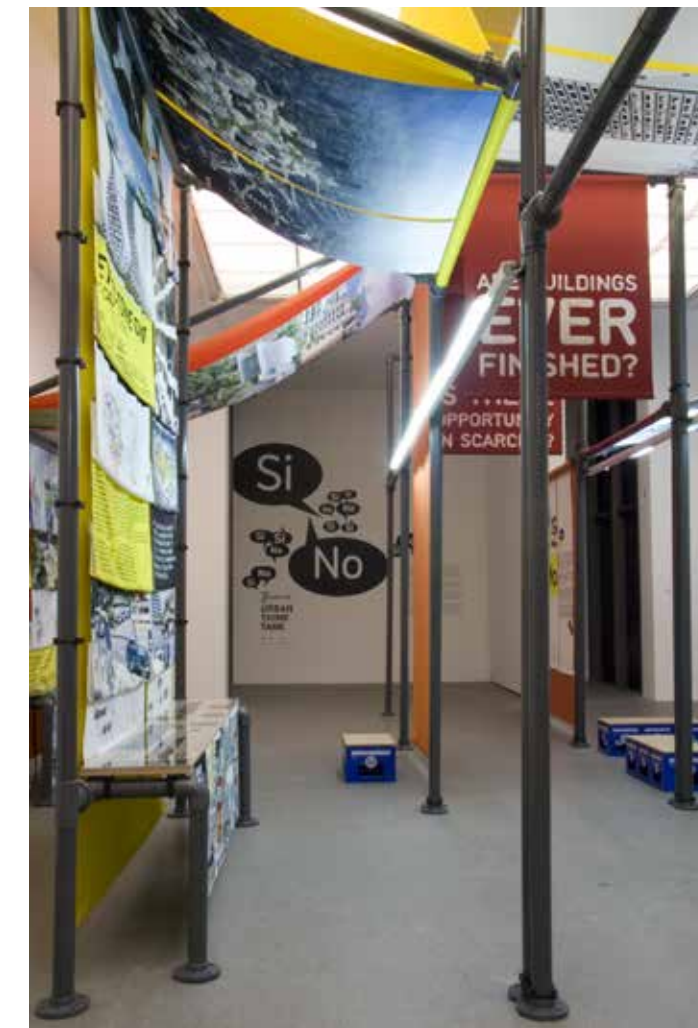
DAMN°: What is the role of architects in these circumstances?

HK: In the 1950s and 60s, Caracas was a place where the best architects in the world constructed buildings and houses. So there is a very strong and visible legacy that is still referred to, even though the cur-

rent context is different. Those architects practically owned the city at the time. Their families developed the land and created an environment. In contemporary circumstances, we need to move beyond paper architecture and start a discussion on theory and reality. This is a great opportunity for Europe! There is indeed a state of emergency. We should identify and prioritise complex challenges and address them with complex solutions, recognising that they cannot necessarily be externalised. We have to think in broad terms, spatially and temporally; specifically, about available land. About how we use the existing territory and alter it through rules and regulations against a background of messy realities. It's a discussion embedded in our Munich exhibition and in our teaching at ETHZ. How to house hundreds of thousands of refugees, for example. The local norms and policy frameworks have to be altered to create liveable cities, and this refugee crisis is actually an enormous opportunity for the whole of society to adapt.



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DAMN°: The state of emergency is obvious in Munich. The city is without sufficient accommodation for the more-than 100,000 refugees who arrived last year. What can Munich do?

HK: We should restrain ourselves from offering quick prescriptions. The big question is an intellectual one. It's not only about finding a solution to a single problem but about questioning whether the limits we have established are universally applicable. We don't need smart cities; rather, less-stupid cities, and we need to build simpler houses. This does not mean creating cheap solutions for migrants. In Caracas, there are of course norms and standards, but they are not followed or enforced in the informal settlements. If one were to integrate all development in Caracas into a set of standards, the whole system would break down. This incoherence illustrates a central mistake to avoid. The standards are focused on the wrong things. We Europeans tend to believe that technology can solve every problem. Maybe technology can help, but it's not a magic solution for big political and social issues – these sometimes require tough ethical decision-making rather than 'innovation'.

DAMN°: Breaking the rules is a big topic when it comes to emergency accommodation in Germany – often, fire safety or the number of emergency exits prevents the municipality from reactivating temporary housing.

HK: In Venezuela, people created more space, building houses around houses and extensions to extensions. Instead, why not create an atlas of voids or a register of vacant structures and spaces that are available for retrofitting and reuse? We've recently made design proposals to retrofit vertical parking garages, structures that actually hold great architectural potential as housing, shops, community centres, and more. We need fewer cars and more socially activated spaces; it's more ecological and economical to retain existing buildings. We absolutely require experimental spaces in Europe that enable us to act in alternative ways. But I would say that the pressure is not yet high enough to sufficiently rewrite the urban planning norms. It is simply a question of fear. People don't want to take responsibility for failure if the changes don't work. But if the status quo is failing, then the political calculus looks very different. <

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Si / No: The Architecture of Urban-Think Tank is at Architekturmuseum der TU München in der Pinakothek der Moderne until 21 February 2016. architekturmuseum.de

The exhibition catalogue, the 10th issue of S.L.U.M. Lab magazine, is guest edited by Alexis Kalagas (184 pages, Zürich 2015).

Reactivate Athens is edited by Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner, Alexis Kalagas, and Katerina Kourkoula, and is due to be published by Ruby Press in 2016.

Hubert Klumpner and Alfredo Brillembourg at the opening of their Si / No exhibition in Munich, 2015 (1)

View of the Si / No exhibition (2)

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