

The London Consortium
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The Rooftops of Lima: case study of an urban desert

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Aiming to initiate interdisciplinary intellectual debate about paradoxes of contemporary culture, Static presents contributions from an international team of academics, artists and cultural practitioners.

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DEFINING THE SPACE

The rooftops of Lima's downtown are an invitation to rethink urban, historic, social and ecological processes. Forgetting the approach of classic urban development and planning regimes, this territory should be viewed as a complex ecosystem, where interdisciplinary research methods are needed to understand these realities that seem to exist in the middle of a desert.

The City of Lima is located in the dry coastal area of Peru, within the valleys of the Chillón, Rímac and Lurín rivers. Lima has a sub-tropical weather, full of humidity on the coast and dryer close to the Andean mountains. There are no strong rains, only *garúa* - wintertime late-night/morning drizzle. Two factors effect it's weather: the Andean mountains, which separate the coast from the Amazonia forest and an extremely cold submarine water flow in the Pacific Ocean that comes north from Antarctica. As a result, a thick layer of clouds covers Lima most of the year, but produces little rain. Without the need to drain off rainfall, the city's rooftops are flat.

When one looks over the rooftops of Lima's 17th, 18th and 19th Century buildings, a process of decay is evident. Converted into slums over the decades, layers of dust and dirt, accumulated over the years, cover the abandoned rooftops. Like small deserts, isolated plots, and *terrains-vagues*, Lima's rooftops are suspended spaces with particular ecologies.

This article is the product of field research carried out as part of an exploratory workshop in the summer of 2003 by an interdisciplinary team focusing on Lima's downtown (el Centro de Lima). The aim of the investigation was to understand the potential of such spaces for art and ephemeral architectural interventions and critically explore the city as a terrain-vague. The downtown, founded in 1535, is Lima's urban nucleus and in 1998, UNESCO identified it as a World Heritage site. Like many cities around the world, informal development drives much of the urbanism within the city's centre. The rooftops of Lima function as a layer that seems to obscure a very complex social reality; however, as part of the urban structure, the rooftops must be understand as both a product and shaping factor of the social transformations within the city.

WITHIN THE LANDSCAPE

Observing the city from above (top to bottom), allows one to view Lima's downtown in a manner uncommon to the everyday experience. The rooftop spaces are an 'urban topography' of an unseen aspect of the city's urbanism. Viewing the city from this perspective allows one to see the city as a new territory and begin identifying the challenges within it.

The traditional site for a panoramic view of Lima is at the edge of the Cerro San Cristóbal, a mountain close to the downtown area, across the river. Among the city's inhabitants, very few have ever visited the observation point. Tourists and non-Lima residents are its primary visitors.

The view of the city from an elevated platform provides access to the city's desert topography. The city becomes an expanse of dirt-covered rooftops; a landscape that allows for metaphorical links to stereotypes of nomadic tribes and hard living conditions. Although referenced from above, free associations such as this speak to the reality of life in downtown Lima.

The rooftops are a kind of parallel city - hidden, but also public. It is a territory that suggests freedom, full of unregulated possibilities within an already existing architectural and civic infrastructure. It is also a space of struggle and survival. In opposite and yet complementary ways, the streets and rooftops of Lima tell the story of the city.

Identifying Lima as a desert, allows us to conceptualize the city as an ecosystem of extreme conditions. The investigation then centers on understanding the ways in which people within Lima create solutions from what seems to be nothing. For example, due to the lack of rainfall, the city's buildings traditionally do not have cellars. Instead, the rooftops become storage sites. Filled with useless furniture, they sometimes appear as wastelands. The logic of the space is related to specific purposes: storage space, informally constructed additions for housing and workshop spaces. Municipal authorities make regular rooftop cleaning campaigns to enforce code regulations and avoid tragedies related to fire, but also because of the weak structures of the old houses.

Here, instead of viewing this phenomenon as symptomatic of decay, we understand these processes as the effect of social problems and challenges, which are inspiring the transformation of existing forms of local cultural symbolism.

HERITAGE AND PROCESSES

Lima was built over an existing pre-Hispanic native settlement. The ruins of this settlement are spread throughout the city as testimonies of the 'defeated' culture. Almost 500 years later, social and urban processes have combined in Lima's downtown to create a situation of imminent disaster. Located in a high-risk area for earthquakes: Lima's history is one of destruction and reconstruction. Oftentimes, improvisational and temporary solutions to rebuild the city become permanent.

Within the Historic Centre of Lima, colonial (16th - 18th century), republican (1850 - beginning of the 20th century), modern (1940 - 70's) and contemporary architecture stands side by side, in extremely contrasting states of conservation and inhabitation. This *patchy* pattern within the downtown urban fabric is the product of its residents finding solutions, by any means necessary, within the existing infrastructural conditions and that oftentimes go beyond providing for their basic needs.

The incomplete gentrification and the slow rate of real estate speculation have done little to create any significant change in the downtown area. Despite the fact that since the middle of the 90's the conservative municipal authorities have developed strong policies to recover the order in the public space (social cleaning of street and informal vendors) and particularly with regard to the architectural patrimony (monuments, *façades*, traditional balconies, etc.) in kind of *cosmetic surgery* not connected with the extreme needs of the local people. In that sense, any improvement of the living conditions is a participatory effort made by the inhabitants: the most important example without no doubt are the *comedores populares* (popular kitchens). Run by women organizations throughout the city, they offer daily meals for very poor people for less than one dollar.

Here is where art and creative design can play an important role to rethink what to do within this urban area. The rooftops of Lima provide a suspended space, a no man's land, which offers the opportunity not only to rediscover the city layers and understand its specific case of urban change within an historic perspective, but also to rehearse creative answers.

THE CHALLENGE: (MORE) OASIS FOR THE DESERT

Even when it is not exactly a *terrain-vague*, Lima's "urban desert", represents a territory available to new forms of signification. Beyond serving as a source of simple provocation or the space for clichéd urban art installations, the city's rooftops challenge us to design new possibilities according to current and urgent needs. This analysis is a brief description of history and current situations, but also recognizes the existing complexity as a creative chaos where everything is possible, and permanence is related with use and re-adaptation.

Large cities call for non-linear urban processes, especially in context like Lima, where the informal economic forces create an alternative capitalism that fills the gaps of the 'formal' economy with its investment and real estate speculation. The identity of the city belongs to the inhabitants, and even its status as a World Heritage site needs to be readdressed to improve the life quality of the city users. Today, cities are becoming huge tourist theme park industries, and threaten to reduce the inhabitants to mere voyeurs, consumers, and mainly only as passer-bys.

Lima's downtown is an urban desert with little hidden oasis. Maybe those experiences show us that community-based efforts can develop improvements, rather than awaiting gentrification processes that produce social cleansing and higher rents. Regardless, such prospects will wait many years to materialize, as the downtown is labelled as risky and dangerous. There is no other future than the present. Even as World Historic Heritage, the downtown area is still a *terrain-vague*, full of possibilities to highlight and signal challenges. It offers the opportunity to acknowledge the strong energy of informality that pulses through the city and its ability to reshape its environments.

City of somebody or no man's land?

Lima's rooftops are an invitation to understand the strength and vitality of informal cities, beyond labels related with modernist ideologies or order and lineal ways of development and progress. The city's downtown is a failed experiment of modernization; and, because of that, a very rich territory of mutant possibilities.

No, the future will not be minimal and full of clean surfaces for everyone, and that is also good.

The desert remains, the challenges too: the oasis awaits.