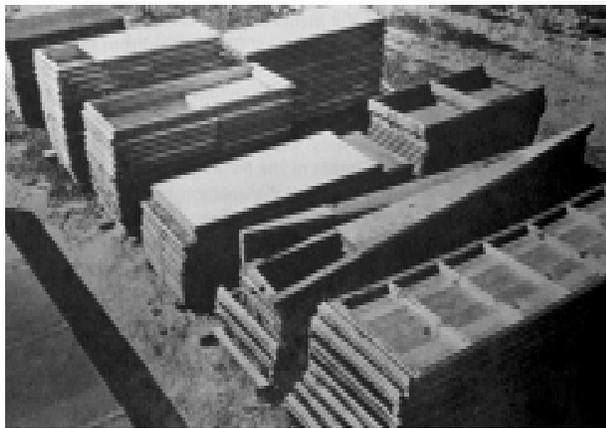
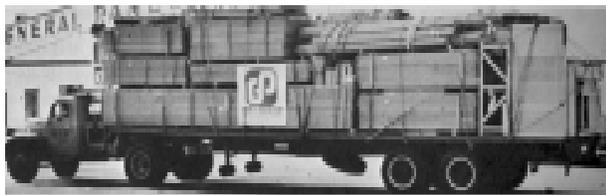


# Shanties to Go

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## INTRODUCTION



This paper looks at the work of Marjetica Potrc, the Slovenian artist and winner of the Hugo Boss Prize in 2000. It focuses on work in a recent show, *Urgent Architecture*, a mini retrospective that also included some of her largest specially commissioned works to date. Trained as an architect, Potrc's art practice produces work that appears architectural. Yet Potrc is not an architect who makes "art"; nor is she an artist who makes architecture the subject matter of her art practice.

What makes Potrc's work pertinent to the theme of this conference is not whether she identifies herself as an artist or as an architect or as someone who works both disciplinary terrains. Potrc's work is fully vested in the institutional apparatus of art, in its disciplinary structures and validating narratives; it is emphatically not architecture.

What is of interest, perhaps, is the way Potrc's work is doubly-framed, in terms of its production and its reception (by artists and by architects). While architects may recognize within it artifacts and procedures that are architectural, the shifts in context that the double framing sets up both defamiliarize and reify architectural conventions, discomfiting, in the process, the discipline and its practice in potentially productive ways.

This double-framing also makes evident disciplinary 'margins', the narrow settings disciplines demarcate for practice and interpretation. Much of Potrc's oeuvre concerns itself with the problem of sheltering the poor. A close reading of her work helps one trace how each discipline frames this issue: the expediency of much socially and culturally engaged contemporary art versus the disciplinary ghetto reserved within architecture for the socially disenfranchised.

The paper proceeds from a larger premise that disciplinary frameworks and practices ought to be continually held up against those of other disciplines, in order to de-naturalize them and expose the way they frame, partition, bracket, shape, and silence issues and knowledge. Concepts in common may lead very different double lives within different disciplinary confines.

The poly-valency of globalized cultural production today also requires of us a double-framing, a dual disciplinary lensing. To begin to make sense of much of contemporary art and architecture (not to mention fashion, media, music, etc.), for example, one ought to parse the multiple, simultaneous, and distributed contexts (geographical, social, disciplinary) in which production, consumption, and reception take place.

This disciplinary double-framing, one that recog-

nizes the multiple, and simultaneous, locations of a cultural artifact or practice, does not see cross-disciplinary traffic in reductive terms. Nor does it compromise disciplinary integrity. Rather it may help reveal disciplinary blind spots. Whatever we, as architects, may think of Marjetica Potrc's work (and many architects are appalled by it), it does put our disciplinary pieties and procedures on the spot — and in the spotlight — with provocative and disturbing results.

### SHANTIES TO GO



Marjetica Potrc is best known for the made-to-order shanties she designs for museums, galleries, and biennials. Fine art installers and museum crews fabricate shanties for her shows, following her faxed-in specifications and on-site instructions. Potrc models her shanties on examples of self-built housing and informal settlements from all over the world: Johannesburg, Istanbul, Amman, and most recently, the West Bank, Caracas, and West Palm Beach. Photographs, texts, and sketches supplement the three-dimensional reproductions, in some cases providing information on the locations from which the shanties have been appropriated. Perhaps due to the pressures of gallery representation, her sketches are taking on a presence of their own. In her most recent show, *Urgent Architecture*, pen and marker sketches that would not look out of place on the walls of a design firm, glossed recurring themes in her work.

Potrc's mode of operation has been quite consistent: she turns research (carried out on the internet and, increasingly, in the field) into art, exhibiting it in museums and on websites. In a sense much of her oeuvre is a compendium of professional and non-professional efforts to address the problem of housing the poor. In contrast to imposed solutions implemented centrally, she is taken by the informal agency evident in the field: the initiatives and strategies that individuals, communities, and NGOs put into play every day.

This proclivity has led her to incorporate the work of an enormous range of people and organizations into her own projects: from Rural Studio in Alabama, the Barefoot College in India, and the Burning Man Festival in Nevada, to the various sites and services strategies developed by housing authorities and NGOs in the developing world. In *Hybrid House*, her major new piece for *Urgent Architecture*, Potrc's ever-widening interest in "self-initiated" solutions takes on a potentially incendiary immediacy as she brings into the mix references to the architectural and territorial strategies with which Israeli settlers occupy the West Bank. (The catalog planned for this show includes a piece by Eyal Weizman, co-curator of *A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture*, the show first commissioned and then banned by the Israeli Association of United Architects).

Engaging such a diversity of approaches and locales, her work risks appearing glib or opportunistic. From certain perspectives (activist art or architecture, for example) it seems to be all over the map, guilty of romanticizing and aestheticizing real-world problems and solutions.



But the radical decontextualization Potrc affects by appropriating real-world constructions and repackaging them for the museum does stop us short when we come across them on gallery floors. The art is at such a remove from the context it pur-

portedly documents and celebrates, the disconnect between the original and the gallery facsimile so in-our-face, that we are led to consider, perhaps even reconsider, the way we conceive of and compartmentalize vernacular material culture into discrete disciplinary and political constructs. By putting shanties into museums Potrc sets up disciplinary disturbances, on both sides of the art/architecture divide. Whether this relocation is ultimately quietistic or productive, she leaves up to us.

For all her success on the art circuit, one senses she maintains an outsider's stance to art discourse and disciplinary history. In fact a close look at her work suggests that perhaps the frisson she and her work generate comes from this outsidership. Trained as an architect in the former Yugoslavia, she presents her work in an uncomplicated, straightforward manner. She says of her work: "[I] translate things I find fascinating and typical for today's society into the gallery so that it becomes a three-dimensional object that speaks about the conditions of contemporary development worldwide". For Potrc, transplanting conditions that already exist is "more interesting than my own fantasies. . . what is in the real world is perhaps more inspiring."

With such disarmingly open critical framing, it is no surprise her work gets read so differently. Some critics co-opt the latent political gestures in her work, harnessing it to a broader critique of art institutions and globalization. Others wonder how anyone could be so formally or politically naive, so unaware of either other art practices or the problematics of exhibiting, even celebrating, the habitats of the third world poor in first world museums?

Much of this disagreement appears to be over the possibility of museum-based activism. The architectural critic Fernando Quesada, writing in *Arte y Arquitectura*, for example, finds that Potrc's "literal" reconstructions do not take a clear position vis a vis "the desolate and desolating urban reality" that is their source. While Francesco Bonami, the art curator and critic, writing in the Guggenheim catalog for the Hugo Boss Prize, waxes lyrical calling Potrc's "a semi-visionary practice in which she is both storyteller and a kind of virtual social worker".

With his qualifications, "semi" and "virtual", Bonami appears to hedge his bets, both endorsing and handicapping her practice — the artist as social worker — finding in it traces of what could be called 'weak' activism. Quesada, on the other hand, finds in his ethical resistance to Potrc's constructions basic disciplinary distinctions between art and architecture. Potrc's museum shanties, he suggests, index differences in the practice of art or architecture and the approach each takes to social issues: between formulating propositions or resolving problems, between producing representations or fabricating solutions.

It may take a certain naiveté to translate an interest in "informal" or "unplanned" cities and shantytowns, in temporary shelters and modes of occupation, into work exhibited in galleries and biennials. A more self-aware or reflexive approach might find itself unsure of its audiences. Perhaps she is unaware of the ironies generated by her practice. Or perhaps she chooses to ignore them. In experiencing the work, this burden is transferred onto the viewer.

Potrc herself does not appear to fret over distinctions made between art and architecture, between cultural production and social engagement. She does not meet our liberal first-world expectations, given the subject matter, of a more strident political stance, of art in service of a cause, or part of a larger collective effort. She does not offer the catharsis of outrage.

Neither is she interested in liberating art from the confines of its institutions and taking it out into the world. Rather, very much the outsider to disciplinary debates about the relationship between art and life (or the isolation of art institutions from social issues), she brings the world outside into the spotlight the museum provides. The museum is, in a very real sense, its primary site: the work is researched, conceived, and produced for what she calls the "public space" of the museum.

Potrc also does not seem unduly concerned with modes of description, their limits, and the institutional contexts within which they are deployed and received. There is a sense that for her the shanties in the gallery stand in for the real things, that they are fully transparent and adequate to tell the story. The careful unpacking of the conventions of documentary photography that Martha Rosler, for

example, undertook in her work, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75), is not something Potrc would entertain. The irony, of course, is that unlike the housing they reproduce, the museum shanties couldn't survive outside its carefully controlled climate; a hard day's rain would reduce them to sodden heaps of construction waste.

The indeterminate registers of her work, curiously passive for all its obvious effrontery, can be traced to her relative disinterest in its material and rhetorical qualities. While her intentions and procedures — her interest in informal housing and her libertarian celebration of individual initiatives in the face of statist failures — are clear, what is not so obvious are her material and formal strategies.

Potrc's work sits astride a number of art strategies without quite mapping any of them; from the documentary impulse of socially aware art practices, to the untutored fabrications of 'outsider art' and the assemblages of installation. Her objects are emphatically sculptural; discrete three-dimensional artifacts in-the-round that invite close study of their dirty materiality in the white world of the gallery. Except that they are not dirty. Scrubbed and unpatinated, they can appear mute on the gallery floor: trojan horses empty of human cargo or shrink-wrapped dioramas reduced to polemical illustration.

Potrc's work invites comparison to the work of other artists (Zittel, Pardo, Fetter) whose work is also situated at the border of different disciplinary practices. Yet unlike their art/design hybrids, Potrc's mimetic approximations do not work the grain of different design languages or fabrication procedures. While their range of reference is clearly broader, almost unpoliced, this disinterest in material and fabrication gives them a doll-house lightness. If one were to imagine all her various shanties lined up for a retrospective, we would get a shantytown theme park, a safe art tourist destination. She takes us to shantytowns but without the funk and the patina, or the point of view of the people who live there.

Yet there is something to this tourism that she sets up. Unlike the subjects of her research — the individuals and community-based activists and architects who live in the communities they are involved in — Potrc operates as a courier, an artist-coyote,

smuggling into the first world not the economically disenfranchised, hidden in truck trailers and shipping containers, but the slums and shelters from which they are desperate to escape. Objectified and made visible in the formal space of the gallery, we can no longer ignore these structures even if we manage to make disappear, from our view and our conscience, the economic migrants who make it across our borders.

In the gallery, we are forced to look at and consider the material language of their bricolage, the poverty of resources that disciplines their making. Out in the world, from a distance or up close, the informal sector's organic order and 'spontaneous' exuberance invite a formal appreciation without danger of reproach. Architectural literature is full of such aestheticized accounts of vernacular solutions. Observing Potrc's recreations in the gallery, however, one becomes aware that even though formal appreciation is the currency of the space, one ought to resist, that one should problematize our unacknowledged desire to romanticize and aestheticize, that one should try and find other ways to look at them.

Potrc's project can also be seen as a disciplinary rescue mission: to bring back to visibility the self-help initiatives of "spontaneous settlements" (a forgotten euphemism of seventies' slum research), the figurative power latent in the abstraction of "core units" — indeed a whole vocabulary of archi-



tectural activism — and to introduce it to a wider cross-section of the public. Certainly her work should not be seen as relabelling architecture as art; in fact the architecture she rehabilitates barely merits recognition within its own discipline. What she does not manage to transfer through her reproductions, however, is what is integral to architecture and to living: the process of weathering; the continuous construction process that keeps these shacks up; the narrative of incremental improvement that inspires the daily struggle to improve one's living conditions.



#### IT TAKES AN ARTIST (TO MAKE A VILLAGE)

Urgent Architecture, curated by Matthew Rush, is something of a coup for its sponsor, the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art (PBICA). During last fall's Art Basel Miami Beach (the international art fair's first American incursion), scores of visitors made the trip to West Palm Beach in order to see



Potrc's first solo exhibition in the USA. During spring 2004, the show moved to MIT's List Visual Arts Center.

A mini retrospective of sorts, the centerpiece of the show is a specially commissioned work, *Hybrid House* (2003), that was fabricated on site. Some of the other work of note in the show includes *Dry Toilet* (2003), *Animal Sightings* (2001), a series of digital prints of wild animals whose terrains have been overcome by suburban sprawl, and objects and photographs of appliances for off-the-grid lifestyles (the *Hippo Water Roller*, the *Clockwork Mobile Telephone Charger*) from her *Powertool Series* (2003).



*Hybrid House* is a departure for Potrc. Unlike earlier installations which reproduced a single example, *Hybrid House* collides different locales into one monstrous *McShanty*. Plain and painted cinder blocks, plastic milk crates, corrugated aluminum, iron rebars, cementitious board, wire lathes, wood studs, hurricane windows, wooden columns, all contribute to a geographical pileup that blends constructions from the Occupied West Bank (both Palestinian and Israeli), Caracas favelas, and Florida trailer parks.

Potrc would like us to see this as an allegory of the "projective capacity" of private desires, an illustration perhaps of the pressures, both spatial and political, of housing the world over. The elements and their combination, however, are too incendiary for it to be left at that; it raises all sorts of formal and political questions. Walking around and through the assemblage, one wonders what Potrc



has wrought, and whether she was even aware of what she was cooking up.

The piece has none of the spatial sophistication of Juan Muñoz's vernacular streetscapes, the deadpan craft of Jorge Pardo, or the careful indexing of global flows that Simon Starling pursues with epicurean precision. Unfortunately, it also has none of the spontaneity and ingenuity of the models it attempts to reproduce either. Much of it comes across as D-I-Y set design, all awkward quotes and obvious clichés. How else are we to make sense of the formal deformations, the careful arrangements of overhead wires, dangling transformers, and disconnected plumbing? For units that are invariably off-the-grid (and especially so when installed in galleries), there was too much defunct infrastructure present.

It did have a certain gee-whiz to it as it ate up the space in the main room. If Potrc is not interested in the materials and conditions of fabrication, she does know how to spin the lumpen bricolage of shanty towns into sculptural agitprop for the gallery. But for someone who professes an appreciation of localized and contextualized initiatives, her decision to source materials for the West Bank, Caracas, and West Palm Beach at the local Home Depot does seem somewhat under problematized. Only the bright blue toilet bowl in Dry Toilet was ordered from Mexico, a bit of authentic tropicalismo that ended up seeming out of place.

Given the site-specificity of spatial, material, and fabrication conditions, Potrc's one-stop solution should give one pause. How do we index material conditions to local economies when West Palm Beach, Caracas, and the West Bank can all be bought at the local D-I-Y store? It is, of course, a commonplace of glocalization talk that the material of shantytowns are at once highly local and part of the flotsam and jetsam of global flows (think of consumer good packaging recycled as sheathing for shacks all over the world). But a participant-observer as privileged at Potrc, who has had close access to so many locations ought to be aware of how the particularities of social and building conventions condition each place.

As I tried to parse the cacophony of Hybrid House, I looked for details that would evidence the hand and eye of the local fabricators/installers. I found only one. A corner in the Caracas favela where



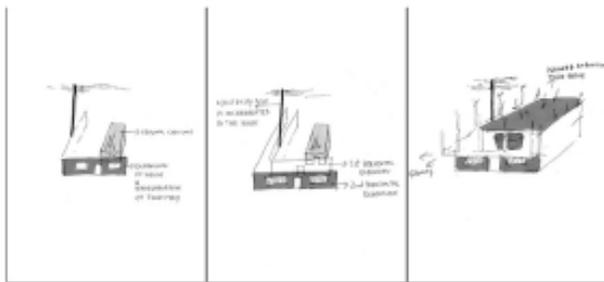
the cinder blocks, meeting at an obtuse angle, produced a wonderful woven rustication in reverse. Later when I asked what of the show, if anything, would be transported from West Palm Beach to Cambridge, Massachusetts, the answer I received had little to do with the comparative material cultures of Florida and Massachusetts, or the translation of third world housing solutions to America's most expensive housing market. It appeared that what was sent depended on what could be readily salvaged and shipped, so the timber was going but the CMUs were not.

Surrounding Hybrid House were versions of Potrc's latest aperçus (that shantytowns and gated communities have much in common and that water is the next "big issue") painted in bright colors on the walls. But because these ideas were not pursued or their provocations tested, there was a whiff of the sloganeering about it all. Having identified shared desires for security, privacy, and home-improvement, one would have hoped Potrc would develop these connections further. Are we to take at face value her assertion regarding the shared aspirations of those who live in shantytowns and gated communities? How should we reconcile the labor and materials that produce the physical improvements in gated subdivisions and in favelas? Is there a correspondence between the do-it-yourself aesthetics of weekend home-improvers in both communities?

Potrc transplants conditions that already exist in the world into the public space of the museum. However, having done that, she doesn't seem to problematize the connection she has put into effect: between the shanty out there (in the world) and its manifestation in here (in the museum). Nor does she seem to consider the relations the relocated shanties inevitably put into play: between vastly different audiences and economies (political, cultural, visual), between radically different conditions of reception and frames of reference.



There was wit in evidence, however, in some of the floor-to-ceiling illustrations. One depicted the war between the barrios and the city (hot oil being poured on the invaders), another the four steps to making an illegal water connection in the barrio: take a pistol, shoot a pipe, make a hole, and siphon off. The small sketches that distilled the informal vernacular of the different locations into museum-ready recipes also had a compelling immediacy. The line drawings combined the brio of cocktail napkin doodles with the sparkle of children's book illustrations. One could imagine a whole show consisting entirely of them.



Dry Toilet comes out of Potrc's work in a community in Caracas's hillside barrios. The piece is a facsimile of an actual dry toilet (with two compost chambers) that she built as part of a three-month residency. The prototype is currently being tested by the local inhabitants. An accompanying video gave a compelling account of its construction, reception, and potential impact in neighborhoods with no running water. However, what the copy was doing on the gallery floor in West Palm Beach was less clear. A barren shell of its counterpart in Caracas, it stood as inert as a display unit in a showroom. With its non-functioning composting chambers empty, it appeared as irrelevant as a commode, a useless bit of furniture. One couldn't but help think that if the intent was to shock the bourgeoisie with some toilet shtick, putting it to use for the duration of the show would have brought the message home. Certainly composting chambers filled (or not filled) with the merde of mu-

seum visitors would have been one measure of the artist's success in transplanting the barrio into the museum.



Watching museum visitors in West Palm Beach peer into Dry Toilet one wondered what their frames of reference were: Porto-lets, campground restrooms, public conveniences in third world cities? Certainly in Caracas, having an artist involved in the construction of a dry toilet gave the whole enterprise a visibility and cache that is not lost on the artist. While acknowledging that composting toilet technology has been around for centuries, Israeli architect Liyat Esakov (Potrc's partner on this project) tells us that local municipal government institutions, including the local water company, are now interested: "It seems like it actually takes an artist to bring this issue to the forefront".

Perhaps this instance of art overcoming bureaucratic inertia and planning paradigms has less to do with the "power of modern art to bring about social and cultural change" (as Esakov and Potrc see it) and more to do with the strange buoyancy of NGO culture in the era of the WTO. Whatever the case may be, there is something literally marvelous going on if we trace the genesis of the project:

A grant from a German cultural organization to an imposingly named and well-connected group of Venezuelan architects and academics (the Caracas Think Tank) makes possible an invitation to an artist to do a project in Caracas. The onsite community work by the artist and her team results in an experimental toilet and its copy, both of which end up simultaneously deployed, one on a barrio hillside, the other as part of a museum installation. Each at different ends of the socio-cultural food chain, both quietly accumulating value.