‘Urban Enactments’
By Andrés Jaque

1. Raimunda vs. ‘The City’

Almodovar’s 2006 film ‘Volver’ displays a relational richness—an urbanism—that cannot be explained as the result of the urban form of Vallecas, the neighborhood on the outskirts of Madrid that is home to Raimunda, the film’s protagonist. Raimunda’s urbanism overflows the limits of the city. It expands into courtyards, kitchens, parties, Tupperware plastic bowls, and cemeteries, and expands to places as distant to Madrid as Granátula de Calatrava, the tiny village where she was born. Urban life is not the direct result of a city’s urban tissue. Nor is it a result of the intentions that produce the city’s architectures. To describe the urbanisms that make cities active, rich, and exciting, we must discover a new way to account for the material production of daily life. Such an account, moreover, must avoid identifying the urban with a confined conception of the city as a conglomeration of fixed patches of land.


‘Image 1’ shows the architectural devices that constitute the environment inhabited by a Mouride family who immigrate to Europe from Touba, Senegal. The females, minors, elders, and disabled remain on the family farm in Touba, where the cost of living can be minimized. The young males however, live in a network of tiny, shared apartments in European cities, where they can maximize income by selling counterfeit DVDs and fake Louis Vuitton bags. As part of a five year long
project my office has developed to systematically study more than one hundred cases of such ‘ordinary urbanisms,’ we have traced the relational extension of one of the tiny apartments located in the Lavapiés neighborhood of Madrid, depicted in the upper right hand corner of Image 1.

Lavapiés is composed of both long established social groups and recently arrived immigrants. This combination is largely due to the effect of an extensive fragmentation of its ownership structure and the vast social transformations that the city has experienced in recent decades. Wholesale facilities, tourist-oriented boutique hotels, refurbished apartment buildings, and a large number of deteriorating dwellings can all now be found within short walking distances of each other. The subway is the place where the police most easily seize undocumented migrants.

The presence of African grocery stores and Senegalese restaurants is vital to empowering the extended community in Madrid. When a young boy is able to emigrate, the oldest woman at the farm house in Touba calls one of the males living in Madrid. He does not answer his cell phone but will, instead, head to a phone parlor where he obtains better rates for international calls. He then calls the family matriarch to learn of the next arrival. If the plan succeeds, months later the new arrival makes his way either to an African grocery store or a Senegalese restaurant where he finds those who will put him in touch with his relatives. Architectures like the Mouride mosques that replace old apartments in the area are what allow us to understand what keeps the group together. A vast number of architectural technologies — from rugs and tapestries, to loudspeakers, to websites and social media, to buildings, fragments of buildings, and aggregations of buildings — interact to produce a collective state of constraint and surveillance that ties the members of the group together within a moral hegemony while simultaneously empowering them as a group of resistors.

2. Material Heterogeneity, Performativity, Shared Agency

In this urban constellation, built devices—such as the apartments, the mosque, the phone parlors, the African grocery stores, and the Senegalese restaurants in Lavapiés—are active in the urban scene only by interacting with a number of diverse technologies such as cell phones, rugs, speakers, online platforms, and money transfer services. This urbanism is not shaped by the city itself—its grids and the volumes and spaces of its buildings—but by an association of heterogeneous devices the interaction of which produces an ecosystem of heterogeneous entities.

This urbanism is not a ‘defined patch of land,’ as cities tend to be described, but a fragmented composition not confined to the city’s borders. Fragments of this constellation can be found in shared spaces collectively constructed in the minds and books of the Mouride believers. These fragments are connected by interaction and the performativity of urban dynamics. They gain continuity when phone calls are made, money transfers ordered, and relatives of recent immigrants informed of arrivals. This urbanism is not fixed but performative. It does not happen in a ‘patch of land’ but in a constellation of interacting agents.

Such an urbanism challenges the way politics is embodied in architecture. In recent years, this issue has compelled a number of theorists and practitioners to align themselves with one of two positions: techno-determinism or techno-
neutrality. The determinists argue that the form of the city and its architectural conditions cause societies to emerge in the ways they do. The neutralists, however, believe that architecture is a neutral actor that can potentially contain any social form. In Image 1, neither notion can be applied. There is not a single architectural device within the image that alone could produce the society it depicts. The apartment could not create the urbanism of the everyday life performed in its interior. A vast range of devices collectively build this fragmented-but-interacting urbanism although the designs of the individual architectures are not without agency. The dimensions of the apartment and its position in the street, for example, play significant roles in this particular urbanism. The apartment, once a domestic unit, now functions as a Mouride mosque. Conditions that catered to its evolved state made its reprogramming possible. The space is diaphanous and its entrance does not disturb the tranquility of the main room. To become part of a Mouride urbanism, however, the apartment needed to engage ‘new technologies.’ It becomes part of such a dynamic urbanism by housing books and minds inscribed with shared beliefs. It is transformed by the existence of Hi-fi speakers and tapestries depicting holy sites. The political agency of the architectural device is shared. The potentials and limitations of each device interact with other entities and construct a new form of agency.

Image 2. Reconstruction of the urbanism of a family group composed by a mother, her son and a number of humans and devices distributed between London and Valdemoro. Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation 2012.

3. The city as a node of urban enactments: the ESCARAVOX, the TUPPER HOMES, and the House in Never Never Land
The various interactions between fragments account for the city’s urban richness. In Image 2, a single mother and her ten-year-old son live on the outskirts of the city in a rented apartment on the same block as the mother’s parents, who can take care of the son while the mother works. Such a relational scheme shapes the way the mother emerges as a component of urban life. This urbanism allows her to use social media sites such as Match.com, where she develops romantic relationships and to use her parents’ apartment in Madrid’s city center, where her online sexual relationships become offline sexual encounters. Similarly, image 3 depicts members of a Hare Krishna community who produce a new urbanism by connecting the shared home they own in the center of Malasaña to an estate in the countryside of Guadalajara that they inherited from a wealthy donor. On the estate, they grow vegetables that they then eat and share with their neighbors at the informal restaurant they run on the ground floor of their home in Malasaña. This interaction is part of a shared space in which the community understands itself as interacting not only with each other but also with the deities present in the paintings and murals that adorn our homes.


Urbanism is not constituted by cities but by the various heterogeneous entities that form unique urban enactments. ‘What is architecture’s role in the collective making of these urban enactments?’ ‘What are the specific material conditions that make architectural devices relevant to the making of urban enactments?’ ‘How can urban enactments embody past urban qualities?’ The Office for Political Innovation and I explore these questions in a number of the architectural projects we developed in the last few years, including the ESCARAVOX, the House in Never Never Land, the TUPPER HOMES, the Sweet
Parliament Home, and the Plasencia Clergy House. These projects participate in previously existing techno-societies. The ESCARAVOX, for example, is embedded within the already existing techno-society of independent cultural groups that are concealed by the official programs of public contemporary art institutions. Never Never Land exists within an ecosystem that integrates the environmental communities of Cala Vadella with a network of international vacationers. The TUPPER HOMES project engages an extended web of friends who witness and discuss the evolution of other people’s homes and decide how to transform their own. The Sweet Parliament Home is part of a number of never-meeting social sectors segregated in a number of publicly visible “bangs” (businesses where rooms are rented by the hour to small groups to engage in very specialized activities such as singing, sleeping, watching movies, cooking, studying or, dressing up). The Plasencia project exists within the context of a politically diverse group of aging Catholic priests who require a residence containing medical services. In all of these projects, our proposals are designed as constellations of technologies, such as buildings, infrastructures, mobile and transformable elements, web sites, catalogs, programs, and events. These constellations are not intended to neutrally host or contain existing societies, nor do they completely redefine the way existing societies perform politically. Rather, our proposals intend to create a collection of actors integrated amongst each other and to encourage experiences in which new and desirable dependencies, solidarities, permissions, restrictions, and conflicts can emerge.

TUPPER HOME's technosociety. Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation.

TUPPER HOME system is an alternative to strategic urbanism. A network of people get together by experimenting the transformation of the interior of their homes and get connected by the collective evaluation and discussion of their results.


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