

GALERIA MPA

GALERIA MOISES PEREZ DE ALBENIZ

Cities: 9 Microfictions

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URBAN CULTURE. Urban culture is permanently redefining itself, but it never loses its political meaning -the polis or the art of coexistence-. Due to its tendency towards self criticism, the democratic space of the city produces the most significant revisions to our own seemingly indestructible codes. In recent years new sensibilities have emerged, important empowerments, protest movements against shameful exclusions, and, despite not everything changing at the rhythm that everyone wants, we are conscious of the fact that it is only in the democratic space of the city where it is possible to realize new social victories. However, urban culture also produces the cliches and low value aesthetics rooted in bias that prevent us from thinking clearly. Consumption has generated its own culture based on appeals to novelty, but its seemingly low impact offer to engage with contemporary trends is by no means free. The destructive capacity of today's commercial invasion is unlimited and irreversible. A city that appears to be the amalgam of millions of stories, exchanges, ambitions, and small marvels can be buried in just a few years by the homogenizing invasion of businesses disguised as progress. They destroy the valuable ground floor facades of buildings, which are an essential aspect of urban life that we must protect.

CENTER. At what point did we abandon our city centers in favor of a life filled with roundabouts and shopping centers on the outskirts of town? How did we blind ourselves to the quality of urban life, only to be seduced by a bigger apartment or townhouse in a residential neighborhood with a garden and a pool? The city is permanently judged, always seen as inadequate for children and the elderly, polluted and noisy, lacking green space, and many other age-old criticisms. We forget that the primary reason for the city's existence is for people to live together and to show tolerance towards those who are different. To abandon this in favor of more comfortable, better defined lives entails a loss of social, cultural, and relational wealth disguised as security, comfort, and tranquility. Meanwhile, the deserted city center is gradually handed off to inhabitants with high purchasing power, or to nonresidential enterprises -repetitive business operations, offices, any number of restaurants and small hotels-. All of them want to capitalize on quality architectural programs, urban plots with logical and cosmopolitan designs, diverse cultural activities, and a large concentration of services at the expense of other areas of the city. There are cases in which this phenomenon is already irreversible, but there are also many places that could still be saved in time to stop an exodus that will eventually generate devastating nostalgia.

PERIPHERY. In the 80s we saw the periphery as a land of promise. Its lack of conventional order, the coarse geometry of its infrastructures, the profusion of gaps of all sizes, the smattering of agriculture with something else, that natural enclave coexisting with industries and old towns absorbed by urban growth... they composed a mosaic of opportunities to explore new typologies, new generations of public spaces, new hybrid relationships between production, landscape, and housing, and new ideas of quality that were far from the norms of the consolidated city center. The real estate sector's apparent lack of interest in these areas and their unplanned and random development made for an environment that was primed for experimental architectural development and urban design. Unfortunately, the periphery never rid itself of its envy of the city center. It sacrificed what it had in free and undetermined space to take on the city's rules of play, but from an inferiority complex that prevented it from developing its own personality. By doing so, many cities that were large enough to conglomerate into various city centers or complete city fragments insisted instead on the sterility of the sole foundational nucleus model with its many peripheries, all of them imperfect or too functionally polarized.

DENSITY. The city is dense by nature. Various forces have tried to put an end to its density with arguments that might have made sense in other eras, but nowadays there are new equations that advise us to rethink the city's densification. Three new factors that underpin the interest of densification are: that the spread of cities destroys surrounding territory which is vital for our future; that the use of the private vehicles must soon end and that shortening distances and making profitable, intensive public transport will be an investment in our daily quality of life; and that the functional compartmentalization of the city is a modern inheritance that creates islands of exclusivity -recreation areas, tertiary centers, residential neighborhoods, shopping centers, industrial parks- that wipe out the democratic bases of the city. The new dense city is layered, accepts the coexistence of all activities and, most importantly, the most representative do not accumulate in the center but spread out into a series of new points that diversify movement and combat centralism. Policies that permit increasing construction without tearing down buildings in exchange for remodeling existing buildings' consumption and waste systems would be very welcome by all. This would attract people to the center and would update an urban landscape that has been worn down by uncontrolled quick fixes and renovations.

MOBILITY. Urban mobility is making monumental gains and will not slow down. Reducing commutes in private vehicles is a priority that many citizens have adopted as a personal commitment to the future. Policies that restrict circulation in urban centers face minimal resistance. If we avoid urban sprawl and connect inhabitants with accessible, nearby centers with clean transportation systems, the private vehicle will be used only for special occasions. Environmental sensitivity and the value placed on profitable, experiential travel are making a difference in modes of mobility that are deeply rooted in culture. The bicycle, scooter, and walking connect movement with physical exercise, enjoyment, contact with nature, and the discovery of the city. These new elements entail an innovation that contradicts criticisms of the city as an aggressive and inhospitable place. Mid-sized European cities with their widespread use of bicycles, effective metro networks, and local trains are already pioneering this process. If our millennials stay faithful to this culture, they will be able to enjoy a totally unfamiliar city experience.

NATURALIZATION. The city reclaims a new pact with nature. Beyond our environmental awareness of climate change and the ecological footprint of human settlements, the pact deals with converting the city itself into nature. Water, waste, and air quality policies need to be updated. Buildings and free space offer untapped agricultural capacity that could improve upon the idea of the park as a classic representation of urbanized nature. Construction processes require massive energy consumption. This, along with the harmful effects of city sprawl, suggest that the most responsible attitudes are those that propose to densify the city in order to make it more sustainable. But we need to make sure that the process of densification is not limited to real estate development. We need to bring nature to architecture, to convert it into a new construction material. We need to reverse the history of the city away from the defeat, sterilization and erasure of nature. We need to lose our obsession with asphalt and support a coexistence with the geological substratum, climate, flora, and fauna in a way that is removed from the romantic and picturesque idea of traditional green spaces.

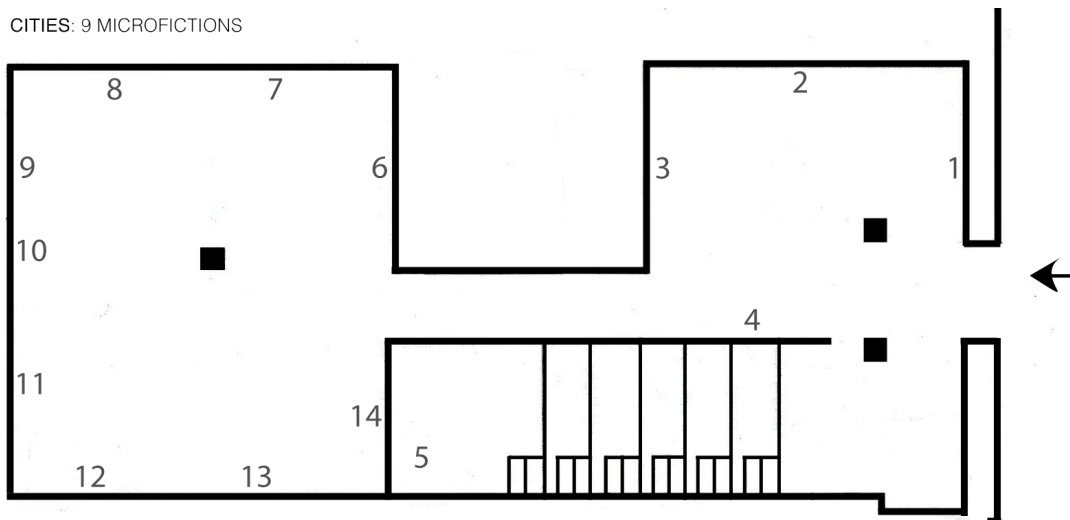
PUBLIC SPACE. Previously, the use of public space was an instrument of social control that sought to standardize the behavior of all citizens. But in the last few decades we have witnessed the appearance of public space that accommodates the differences that the city is obliged to foster and validate. However, we know that not all space between buildings can be considered public space, and that the quality of public space in our cities is clearly in decline. It is essential to recognize that as a society we have not known how to overturn traditional concepts of the street, plaza, and park in order to create public spaces for the 21st century. The most unfortunate proof of this weakness is the indiscriminate conversion of living environments -from the outskirts to traditional markets- to private exploitation schemes that simulate an exaltation of the public -an infinity of restaurant terraces, dubious gastro markets, excessive lighting...-. In cities whose uniqueness is the main draw for tourists and citizens alike, the proliferation of franchised companies from the same brands is erasing the differences between Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Lisbon. This also expels residents from the historic centers. It is essential to ask oneself whether this destruction of local color is not destroying the heritage that has served as the substrate for centuries of daily life, this being the most valuable substrate on which to found a diverse and open civil society.

THE IN BETWEEN CITY. When it is insistently repeated that by the year 2050 75% of humanity will live in cities, we never ask what will happen to the remaining 25% who apparently will not be able to do so, and who therefore will be unable to access education, culture, and health. Incidentally, it is hardly mentioned that Europe is already within that threshold, and that Spain has fully met the statistic with almost 80% of its territory inhabited by barely 20% of the population. The abandonment of the countryside and the lack of young people

and women there give the impression that living away from the city is not a choice, but rather a supervening circumstance. What territory are we imagining between cities of the end of the 21st century? Uninhabited? Waste containers? A generator of the energies necessary to feed the insatiable city? What is certain is that today, both the consolidated city and the rural environment are already melding together. We are not capable of thinking about the city of the future without understanding this empty space that provides us with air, water, and food. We also cannot escape the fact that the rural environment is the anthropological framework of our memory and the history of the generations that have come before us. We need to grant urban content to this city between cities by equipping it with the best opportunities in order to avoid the exodus to the cities that endangers our survival.

IN DEFENSE OF DESIGN. Although architecture and urban design are crucial to this process of reconsidering the city and redefining its models of quality, the forces that give form to the city today are unfortunately not guided by intellectual reflection and design. In a way, the drama that awaits us is not the surrender of urban space to economic powers, but rather the disappearance of thinkers, artists, and architects in the construction of the city, and the silent and seemingly consensual transformation that consolidates this marginalization. The committed position of intellectuals, art's critical consideration of all kinds of conflicts, and the synthesizing capacity of architecture to transform crises into opportunities provide the most ambitious ideas to address the transformation of the city understood as the most important collective construction that represents us as a society. Cities that have turned themselves over to commerce, consumption, or to the lower forms of quality offer an only too clear example of human weakness converted to the worst collective heritage. On the other hand, cities that have proudly taken care of what history has left them and that have known how to enrich themselves with the materials of our time by trusting their architects, artists, and thinkers have high morale and an institutional strength that allows them to be more critical and to continue changing with the necessary ambition in these turbulent times.

Juan Herreros, 2019



1. Juan Ugalde, *Ciudad Nueva Visión* (2006)
2. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Still Life Burner State II* (2007), *Birthday Party* (2008), *Apple Tree* (2004), *Old Street* (2010)
3. Sabine Hornig, *Window 1* (2001)
4. Celine Condorelli, *Something Stronger than Skepticism* (2011)
5. Juan Uslé, *Solitaires* (2017), *Urban Kiss* (2018)
6. Alejandro S. Garrido, *City of London* (2019)
7. Antoni Muntadas, *Double Exposure Tokio Seoul* (2010)
8. Luisa Lambri, *Sin título (De la Warr Pavilion 1)* (2007), *Sin Título (De la Warr Pavilion 2)* (2007)
9. Javier Campano, *Lisboa* (2015), *Madrid* (2011), *Nápoles* (2016), *Nápoles* (2016)
10. Basurama, *Cementerio de neumáticos* (2008)
11. Dennis Adams, *Traitor (Airborne)* (2002), *Liar Liar (Airborne)* (2002)
12. Itziar Okariz, *Mute* (2008)
13. Angel Marcos, *China 20* (2007)
14. Johanna Calle, *Plano (Bogotá)* (2008)