







# THE NAKED TRUTH ARCHITECTURE OR REVOLUTION

Architects are ridiculed if they take a moral position, and attacked if they don't. What, then, in the 21st century, is 'the duty of the architect'?

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1. (Previous page) what would have been the luxurious atrium lobby of the Centro Financiero Confinanzas became the informal meeting space for the 3,000 former squatters of the Torre David. The product of a toxic history of economic turbulence and populist politics gone awry, it became emblematic of the deepening housing crisis faced by the urban poor and the entrepreneurial will of humans to survive and thrive

2. Aerial photograph of Caracas, now one of the most violent cities in the world with over a third of the population living in slums. The Modernist centre stands rigid while the barrios seep over and around the topography like a living, liquid culture



1. Martin Filler, ‘The Insolence of Architecture’, *New York Review of Books*, 5 June issue, 2014.  
2. James Riach, ‘Zaha Hadid Defends Qatar World Cup Role Following Migrant Worker Deaths’, *The Guardian*, Tuesday 25 February 2014.  
3. Paul Goldberger, ‘Zaha is Still Wrong About Construction Worker Conditions’, *Vanity Fair Online*, 27 August 2014.

In ‘The Insolence of Architecture’, a piece on Rowan Moore’s book *Why We Build, Power and Desire in Architecture* in the *New York Review of Books*,<sup>1</sup> Martin Filler wrote that Zaha Hadid ‘has unashamedly disavowed any responsibility, let alone concern, for the estimated one thousand laborers who have perished while constructing her project so far. “I have nothing to do with it,” Hadid has stated. “It’s not my duty as an architect to look at it.”’

This was quite a claim, particularly given that Zaha’s Al Wakrah Stadium is not due to start on site until 2015. No one, in fact, has died while constructing her project. Zaha – uncomfortable with the blood of 1,000 labourers apparently on her hands – filed a libel suit in the New York State Supreme Court. Martin Filler sent a correction to the *NYRB*’s editors, saying, ‘I regret the error’. Zaha has never been loquacious, and her comments were edited to make her appear callous. Asked in the original *Guardian* piece if she was concerned, she replied, ‘Yes, but I’m ... concerned about the deaths in Iraq as well, so what do I do about that? I’m not taking it lightly but I think it’s for the government to look to take care of.’<sup>2</sup>

Zaha remains under attack. ‘Zaha is Still Wrong About Construction Worker Conditions’<sup>3</sup> is the title of a *Vanity Fair* piece by critic Paul Goldberger published after Filler’s retraction. There is a sense of a witch hunt, and it is notable that so many of the articles and the public reactions to them end in gender. It is ironic that the project itself has its own anthropomorphic ‘gender issues’; the stadium building with its sleek, pink, double-petalled roof surrounding an opening has been compared to a vulva:

a similarity Zaha denies. That Zaha is a powerful woman makes her the perfect Lady Macbeth of architecture. But her real crime, according to the press and countless blogs, is that she is not taking a moral stand or using her celebrity status to publicise and address the ethical – and very serious – problem of migrant worker conditions.

At the other extreme, the journalist and author Dan Hancox in his piece for this publication, ‘Enough Slum Porn, The Global North’s Fetishisation of Poverty Architecture Must End’ (AR September), launched an attack on Urban-Think Tank (U-TT), an interdisciplinary design and research practice now based at the Swiss Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich, for their work that addresses slum conditions in the global south. Hancox criticised them for focusing attention on the Torre David – a 45-storey squatted tower in Caracas, now under eviction – by putting it at the heart of the Venice Biennale 2012, for which they won the Golden Lion (which they then gave to the residents of the tower). He compares their explorative work to a form of imperial exploitation, unaware perhaps of the Venezuelan origins of U-TT. He calls their engagement ‘parasitical’, is indignant that they are ‘white’ and ‘male’, and omits their 20 years of research, teaching and built interventions in order to justify a sensational headline. Hancox offers no alternative to drawing the public to focus on the slums as an urgent urban problem that suffers, like the Qatari migrant workers, from invisibility. After a Marxist rhapsody on the horrors of modern slum life, his proposition – in the absence of one – seems simply laissez-faire.

3. The sleek facade of the Torre David reinvented by its former inhabitants. After eviction, the government’s unresolved redevelopment plans for the site oscillate between selling the structure to Chinese investors, to levelling it for a public park, to turning it into a new city hall

Architects, it appears, can’t win. They are attacked if they don’t take a moral position, and ridiculed if they do. So what, then, is ‘the duty of the architect’? What is the architect *able* to do? Fundamentally, what are architects *for* in the 21st century?

There is no question that the architect is marginalised. The privatisation of building, economies of development and bigger liabilities have meant that architects are appointed late, once strategies and scope are set, and exit early. As one member of large consultant teams, their role is reduced to form-making or decoration. Alejandro Zaera-Polo, both as a practitioner and Dean of Princeton SoA, sees architecture now as residing in the building envelope, and has focused his attention there as a potential site for reintroducing political ideology. He observes, ‘our generation of architects has not been politically active ... we have been consumed in the means of production and in simply making buildings’.<sup>4</sup> The architect then has been trapped within the thin skin of the facade, like a pressed flower, and with about as much command.

How did this happen? Where is the vision that once motivated architects to work to the limits of the discipline and beyond towards an overall ‘good’? Where is the discourse and collective goal? Is it impotence that has made architects so cynical today, or is this the inevitable trajectory of 20th-century architectural theory and late capitalism? Does architecture end in ultimate solipsism where the goal is simply to construct a colossal version of oneself, the ‘mega-architect’?

Where Modernism merged utility and art resulting in a sense of earnest conviction, Postmodernism liberated each from the other: architects were happy to frolic carefree in the realm of art and aesthetics; they shook off burdensome morality, leaving it for the politicians. Mistrust of earnestness was one of Postmodernism’s defining characteristics, with cynicism following close behind. Humanism put man at the core: and where Modernism promoted function, and Postmodernism, form; humanism favoured a balance between them. Post-humanist, Deconstructivist architecture then removed the human from the centre, banished form and function and focused purely on the creation of the object rather than on its effect on mankind. *The End of Architecture?: Documents and Manifestos*<sup>5</sup> emerged from a period of recession to reassess the role of the architect when those such as Zaha, Coop Himmelb(l)au, Lebbeus Woods, Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi were working out their positions on paper and didn’t necessarily expect to build. The critical stance was not only apolitical but almost *anti*-social. In *The Pleasure of Architecture*, Tschumi wrote, ‘[architecture’s] real significance lies outside utility or purpose and ultimately is not even necessarily aimed at giving pleasure’.<sup>6</sup> This is probably just how they felt in Spain when construction was stopped on Eisenman’s mammoth, slouching City of Culture of Galicia after it nearly bankrupted the region.

Modernism promised rational, economic and ergonomic solutions transfigured by art, but tended to take more than it gave and so lost its moral command. People had to give up all that was most engrained; brave new forms cleansed of tradition replaced familiar ones that held deep

4. Alejandro Zaera-Polo, ‘The Politics of the Envelope’, *Volume* #17, Fall 2008.  
5. Peter Noever (Editor), *The End of Architecture?: Documents and Manifestos (Architecture & Design)*, Prestel, 1997.  
6. Bernard Tschumi, ‘The Pleasure of Architecture’, *Architectural Design* 3, March 1977, p218.  
7. Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*, Dover Edition, 1986, first pub J Rodker, 1931.

‘Does architecture end in ultimate solipsism where the goal is simply to construct a colossal version of oneself, the “mega-architect”?’

meaning. To profess now to want to make the world a better place would have architects openly laughing in your face. And yet, at the same time there is a growing nostalgia for the clarity and conviction of the ideals of Modernism. While architecture was taken as a medium for revolution by the Marxist left in Russia, those such as Moisei Ginzburg and Alexei Gan, and by Le Corbusier as the means to avoid it, both saw in it the potential to improve the world.

Frederick Etchells, translator of Le Corbusier’s *Vers Une Architecture*, 1923, described the book as ‘the most valuable thing that has yet appeared, if only because it forces us, architects and laymen alike, to take stock, to try to discover in what direction we are going, and to realise in some dim way the strange paths we are likely to be forced to travel whether we will or no’. In it, under the heading, ‘Architecture or Revolution’, Le Corbusier writes, ‘the machinery of Society, profoundly *out of gear*, oscillates between an amelioration of historical importance, and a catastrophe. It is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest today: architecture or revolution?’<sup>7</sup> *Architecture ou Révolution* was the original intended title for *Vers Une Architecture*.

It is in this spirit that Urban-Think Tank operates.





4. U-TT's Vertical Gym in Chacao's Barrio La Cruz grew from a restricted footprint and nowhere to go but up. The structure concentrates a dense programme of activities over 1,000 square metres of vertical space. The local crime rate dropped by 30 per cent after its construction, two more have since opened and more are planned



Alfredo Brillembourg, a Venezuelan-American, and Hubert Klumpner, from Austria, met at Columbia University where they studied architecture together. In 1986 Brillembourg returned to Venezuela, a country that would undergo actual political revolution, and founded U-TT. In 1998 Klumpner joined him in Caracas. They have been working together ever since. In 2005 they published *Informal City*, a study of Caracas, and in 2007 they formed Sustainable Living Urban Model Laboratory (SLUM Lab) at Columbia. Since 2010, they have held the chair for Architecture and Urban Design at ETH, Zurich, where they operate at a metropolitan, urban and architectural scale, studying ‘regional urbanisation and informal globalisation’ in parallel with an output of written work and built projects at various scales. Architecture or revolution here applies literally, and has created a new kind of practice and approach that already seems essential.

Caracas was the context that inspired U-TT, and is just one of the many cities that will become the site of 80 per cent of future urban growth. Today at least a billion people exist in slums around the world – and this is where the next two billion will live. ‘Here’, as Klumpner puts it, ‘generations will grow up ... this is a clear and present danger’.<sup>8</sup> Every mega-city – Mumbai, Johannesburg, Lagos, Jakarta or Mexico City – has its own rapidly expanding version of slum that differs according to its context, geography, climate and politics. Mumbai’s Dharavi, at 500 acres with a population of around one million people, is the city’s largest,

and one that generates \$1 billion a year in revenue. Caracas underwent intense change in the 20th century: Venezuela discovered oil in 1914, was a member of OPEC by 1960 and the Arab-Israeli war in ’72 made it suddenly, massively rich. Huge infrastructural investment was followed by nationalisation. A desperate cycle of borrowing and debt led to Black Friday in 1983 when the bolívar crashed to devastating effect. Political unrest led to protest, then riots. Curfews were introduced; inflation soared and centralisation led a population surge to Caracas increasing numbers from 3.8 to nearly 6 million in 10 years, a third living in slums. Revolutionaries and reactionaries were polarised with the city divided into five ‘secure zones’. Private police patrolled gated communities encircled with razor wire: Caracas became one of the most violent cities in the world. In a last sigh of optimism, construction started in 1990 on the tower for the Centro Financiero Confinanzas, later known as the Torre David after its developer David Brillembourg.<sup>9</sup> His sudden death, followed by a series of bank closures, led to the 90 per cent completed project being seized by a government insurance

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5&6. Before and after: Elemental's incremental housing for families of the Quinta Monroy, Iquique, Chile. The US\$ 7,500 government subsidy, which had to pay for the land, the infrastructure and architecture, was used to build ‘half a good house’ rather than a whole bad one, the occupants to grow into the void over time

agency, who left the third tallest skyscraper in South America unfinished and abandoned. In 1992 Hugo Chávez attempted a coup, was jailed, and released two years later. By ’99, a year after being elected, he proposed a new constitution, and significantly for future squatters, declared that ‘every person has the right to adequate, safe, comfortable and hygienic housing’. In 2007, an evicted group of squatters turned to the Torre David for shelter. Four years later Chávez enabled the government to ‘seize idle urban lands, non-residential buildings and assets required for building housing developments’.<sup>10</sup> The slums were expanding: aerial photographs of Caracas show the Modernist core at the centre standing rigid and inert while the barrios seep over and around the topography like a living, liquid culture. In 1998, both Brillembourg and Klumpner had day jobs in architectural practices, producing designs for the Caraquenian bourgeoisie. In parallel, Brillembourg had set up a summer school and an NGO ‘think tank’ that operated at night. As the politics unfolded, it became clear that Chávez didn’t see the revolutionary potential of housing, envisioning only prototypical Modernist mega-blocks on the periphery of the city. The explosion of urbanism in the global south was real, visible and urgent, but lacking architectural research. Most of Brillembourg and Klumpner’s peers had no interest in the slums, they were focused instead on what lay beyond, in Europe, and Spain in particular, seduced by the potential of the ‘Bilbao effect’. Eventually support was found in Gerhard Schröder’s German Federal Culture Foundation, a global research institution with large resources. Armed with the material they had collected, in 2000, with the help of a Canadian NGO, Brillembourg and Klumpner smuggled themselves into a meeting of the UN Habitat and spoke out. The critical problem they had identified was simply that ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’ never meet. Brillembourg and Klumpner took an embedded approach to research, recognising that if they were to achieve anything meaningful, they would have to be the ‘go-between’, bridging two radically different worlds. From nights of flying bullets in the favelas to cocktails in black tie with German senators, this new role demanded a spectrum of very different skills. Social ecosystems, economics and politics had to be negotiated, while avoiding specific political alliances. A new kind of ‘activist’ architect was emerging, one who doesn’t wait for government commissions, but through direct engagement identifies what needs to be done and finds the means to make it happen. In 2009, Justin McGuirk, writer and curator of the *Torre David: Gran Horizonte* Biennale installation with U-TT, began a search for alternative approaches to urbanism and the legacy of ‘the dream of modernist utopia [that] went to Latin America to die’.<sup>11</sup> The result, *Radical Cities*,<sup>12</sup> is an excellent portrait of the whole South American continent as testbed for experimental and original strategies. As early as the 1960s, British architect John Turner looked at the barriadas of Lima as an intrinsic part of the urban fabric, and proposed ways to adapt them to become a natural extension of the city as an alternative to slum clearance and the physical and

cultural alienation of their inhabitants. In 1963, Charles Jencks published the barriadas next to Archigram and the Japanese Metabolists as a model with important lessons for housing and urbanism.<sup>13</sup> McGuirk revisited the *Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda*, or ‘PREVI’, in Lima, one of the great visionary housing projects of the 20th century, now largely forgotten. In 1966, Fernando Belaúnde Terry, then President of Peru and an architect by training, initiated a competition to rethink mass, high-density, low-rise housing, and drafted in architect Peter Land as UN Project Director. Land invited a stellar cast of international architects to ‘design and construct a neighbourhood of approximately 1500 new houses ... [to] develop methods and techniques to rehabilitate and extend the life of existing older houses, and ... for planning the rational establishment and growth of spontaneous housing settlements to meet proper standards’.<sup>14</sup> The team included James Stirling, Christopher Alexander, Aldo Van Eyck, Charles Correa, Atelier 5, Kiyonuri Kikutake, Fumihiko Maki and Noriaki (Kisho) Kurokawa among others. The jury, unable to choose a single winner, built them all. A military junta overthrew the president and although the first stage was pushed through by the UN, the project came to an end and the experiment was abandoned. Four hundred and fifty original prototypes were designed for growth and adjustment over time as the needs of their inhabitants changed, and now remain embedded at the heart of later additions. U-TT’s film team is currently documenting the project.



8. Hubert Klumpner and Alfredo Brillembourg in conversation, Zurich, August 2014.  
9. The developer David Brillembourg was a second cousin of Alfredo Brillembourg’s: Alfredo was not involved in the the Tower development.

10. Alfredo Brillembourg, Hubert Klumpner and U-TT (editors), *Torre David, Informal Vertical Communities*, Lars Müller, 2013.  
11. Justin McGuirk, speaking at the Serpentine Pavilion, 27 June 2014.  
12. Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture*, Verso, 2014.  
13. *Architectural Design*, August 1963, pp 375-6.  
14. *Architectural Design*, April 1970, pp187-205.



7. One of many analytical and propositional diagrams of the Torre David, produced by U-TT in collaboration with the inhabitants, aimed at making the building sustainable and functional with minimal means and intervention

Incremental design was economically systemised by Alejandro Aravena, of the Chilean practice Elemental. Like U-TT, he believes that only architects have the multiple skills to tackle current social, urban, political and economic issues, and his practice reflects the strategic alliances needed to cross these borders. His business partner was a former transport engineer, and the CEO of COPEC, the Chilean oil company, sits on the board of his company. He states, ‘professional quality not charity has shaped the entire operation of Elemental’, which he calls a ‘do tank’ that works within the existing conditions of the market. When Aravena was approached to build social housing, he concluded that if funds are available to make just ‘half a good house’ rather than a whole, bad one, then just build half, with a void for the inhabitants to expand into. The government would supply the ‘site, the structure ... and technically difficult elements’.<sup>15</sup> There is an austere elegance to both the thinking and the buildings themselves, which softens as the families colonise the gaps left for them. Elemental began working on an urban scale after Chile’s devastating 2010 earthquake and tsunami, and applied the same lateral logic to the city redesign for which they had just 100 days. They proposed a reordering of the urban layout, infrastructure and land ownership using a coastline forest to create a new social space that was also a buffer zone for dissipating future tsunamis.

Guatemalan architect Teddy Cruz has targeted the ‘Political Equator’ for study, looking at unprecedented migration across global borders, towards wealth, with cheap labour outsourced to the south. He focuses principally on the exchange across the Tijuana-San Diego frontier. Here, not only do people emigrate north, but as American suburbia becomes more bloated, discarded houses, ‘entire chunks of the city’, move south across the border. The slums of Tijuana have built themselves out of the waste of San Diego; prefab bungalows are mounted on steel stilts, freeing up space below to be filled with more housing or businesses, layering spaces and economies. This is plugging the ‘void’, like that created by Aravena, with more complex support systems. Cruz identifies, ‘the church, social rooms, collective kitchens and community gardens [as] the small infrastructure for housing. Dwellers are participants co-managing socio- economic programmes’.<sup>16</sup>

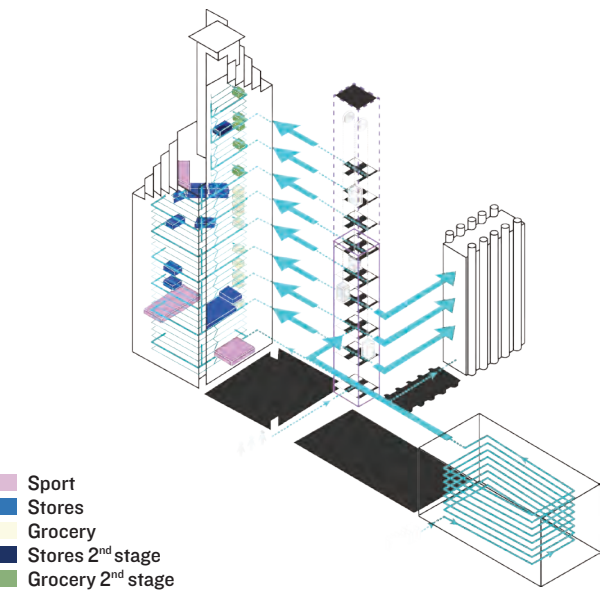
Cruz is special advisor on Urban and Public Initiatives for the City of San Diego, and is taking lessons from the Tijuana slums to apply in middle-class San Diego, in an ironic reverse migration. The premise is to redefine density as the number of social exchanges rather than objects per acre. “The best ideas for shaping the vast cities of the future will not come from enclaves of economic power and abundance but from areas of conflict and scarcity from where an urgent imagination can inspire us to rethink urban growth today.”<sup>17</sup>

The overlapping programmatic complexities Cruz identifies as so valuable – housing, shops, kitchens, cafés, bars, workshops, a church – were all present in the 28 squatted floors of the Torre David. This community of 3,000 inhabitants colonised a skyscraper without lifts, motorbikes instead becoming the vertical transport. It is a unique typology that illustrates the creative intelligence

of the ‘bottom up’: one that could hold clues for other dead inner-city speculative development. U-TT produced a meticulous study of the occupied building and the activities in it, through drawings, photographs, interviews and film, and working with environmental engineers, developed minimal interventions that would make the tower fully functional while keeping its ethos intact. They also speculate on how a network of models like this could interact with each other and the larger city as a whole. It is a utopian vision but, in the spirit of Yona Friedman whom they enlisted to advise, it is a realisable and convincing one. As the evictions continue, Brillembourg reflects, ‘the point was never to preserve what was destined to be a temporary and improvised reality. Rather ... to learn from the site and community ... alternative modes of urban development, which symbolise how cities are evolving in present times’.<sup>18</sup>

U-TT uses the term ‘urban acupuncture’ to describe smaller, strategic interventions, and techniques for knitting together the formal and informal cities: removing stigma, for instance, by inserting little pieces of recognisable urban fabric to create public spaces in the barrios, so melting borders. This is design applied laterally to maximise the impact of minimal resources. They introduced cable cars for urban use, a surreal import from the ski slopes of Switzerland, that cut travel time between the slums and the city centre from one and a half hours to an average of 10 minutes, radically changing lives and making the work, social and cultural infrastructure of the city available to many for the first time. Their Vertical Gym in Santa Cruz (Venezuela) stacked multiple series of programmes on a small available footprint to create a safe recreation space used by thousands; the local crime rate fell by 30 per cent shortly after it was completed. Since then, a further two have opened and more are under way. Developing ‘prototypical’ designs and principles that can be reused is U-TT’s method of applying their core research.

Klumpner, a self-declared fan of the historian Eric Hobsbawm, believes in the pervasive history of cities,



15. Alejandro Aravena, lecture at the MIT, 9 April 2012.  
16. Teddy Cruz, Estudio Teddy Cruz website.  
17. Teddy Cruz, TED Talks, 5 February 2014.  
18. Alfredo Brillembourg in conversation with the author, Zurich, August 2014.

8. Future city: extrapolating from their investigative work with Torre David, one of U-TT’s speculative proposals for how the city could develop in the future to overcome the dangerous and unsustainable extreme segregation of rich and poor, formal and informal

Photographs  
Iwan Baan, I-4  
Elemental, 5,6  
U-TT, 8



the absence of a ‘homogeneous past’ and how spaces are continually reinvented through reuse. In conversation, he pointed out how the urban strategies used in the global south are also relevant to 21st-century Zurich: Altstadt is an area of the city colonised by refugees, prostitutes, gypsies and artists with structural patterns and social behaviours not unlike those found in Latin America, and where design principles observed in the barrios could be imported to Europe to improve current conditions.<sup>19</sup>

But can this new approach be taught? Brillembourg outlined U-TT’s goal to produce a new ‘entrepreneurial architect’; a ‘hybrid of renaissance master and urban hustler’.<sup>20</sup> The role has to bridge ‘ambassador, diplomat, spy, reporter and guerilla builder’, the academic challenge being, he says, ‘how to teach transgression’. Students are taught by economists and social scientists as well as architects, and navigate scenarios as quasi-developers, or are embedded in other institutions to start negotiating the territories that cross conventional architectural boundaries. U-TT has now collected a significant body of research in various forms: statistics, mappings and a vast film archive which is continually added to. The Latin American spirit with the resources of northern Europe Brillembourg personifies as a ‘Mexican wrestler in a Swiss flag’. Communication is critical, and film-making, new media, the internet and mobile phones are new architectural tools.

The practices mentioned here, observing and engaging with slums, neither romanticise nor fetishise poverty. They learn from it, ameliorate where possible, and reveal this knowledge through design with the aim of integration. The built projects have an integrity in common, and an aesthetic that emerges from stripping away the superfluous. Form arises from an economic and strategic as well as aesthetic logic, not unlike the tenets of early Modernism. The social agenda is back, with a new energy and sharpened by the brutality of late capitalism. There is no

room for ‘insolence’ when the built outcome remains fluid, in a constant process of development and adaptation. The medium becomes a living thing rather than an inert object, so the means of engagement have to change. Speed becomes critical: the ability to move fast, to observe, process vast quantities of information, to identify, simplify and articulate problems and respond with both rationality and intuition – to rethink and re-form.

In this age of explosive urbanisation and little stability, it seems architects should be designing at the core of decision-making. That Zaha is under attack demonstrates that the public believes architects have more power than they actually do, and expects them to perform a larger social role: the role of the client is not under scrutiny, but should be. Ironically, in *The End of Architecture*, Zaha’s essay <sup>21</sup> is a thoughtful lament for responsibility in both teaching and practice, and the loss of architecture’s social conscience. In Brillembourg’s words, ‘if the 19th century gave birth to the horizontal city, and the 20th century ... to the vertical city, then the 21st century must be for the diagonal city, one that cuts across social divisions’.<sup>22</sup>

‘Activism’ shouldn’t replace architecture, but can extend its influence. When the architect operates within the language of the discipline, not only through action, but through form, an outcome of cultural significance is possible. But the process of design may now need to start earlier with the ‘invention’ of the client. The power of architecture is the power of synthesis, and the ability to coordinate within cities that lack coordination. The extreme segregation of rich and poor, formal and informal, is dangerous and unsustainable. No one knows better how ideas should manifest through the built city than the engaged architect. This territory needs to be reclaimed, and must be where some of the ‘duty of the architect’ lies. The direction has never seemed clearer or more urgent: architecture *as* revolution.

19. Hubert Klumpner in conversation with the author, Zurich, August 2014.  
20. Alfredo Brillembourg in conversation with the author, Zurich, August 2014.  
21. Zaha Hadid, ‘Another Beginning’, *The End of Architecture?*, Prestel, 1997.  
22. Justin McGuirk, *Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture*, Verso, 2014.