AESTHETIC POLITICS: SHANTYTOWN OR NEW VERNACULAR?

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The world we see is for us always both form and significance. Our aesthetic experience reflects both. Thus, there is a political aspect to aesthetics and an aesthetic aspect to political judgement and political struggle. This article reviews the aesthetic politics around Third World popular settlements. I review first the way settlements are "seen" in the literature of academic analysis. Then I show how it was possible for me to see the fragile beauty in a squatter dwelling and why this perception was impossible for others. Finally, I suggest how designers could help legitimize the claim of poor people to the city by aesthetic politics.

JANICE PERLMAN STARTS HER BOOK *The Myth of Marginality* with a picture of a squatter settlement on the steep slopes of the Rio hillside (FIG. 1). She asks her readers what they see. A disorderly slum — "chaotic, poorly-built, overcrowded?" Or a neighborhood in progress, "characterized by careful planning in the use of limited housing space and innovative construction techniques on hillsides considered too steep for building by urban developers?" Perlman sees the favela as physical expression of a people struggling upward against obstacles.

Perlman starts with impression because impressions have been important elements in shaping policy. Squatter settlements have been seen as rural enclaves in the city, "urban villages" within which migrants from the countryside make a slow transition from peasant values and skills into the culture of the city. (The planners with whom I was working in the sixties generally took this view.) Or they have been seen as quintessentially urban phenomena and as the setting for what are essentially new and urban institutions. They have been thought of as "marginal" to the politics and economics of the city or, alternatively, as an integral element in both

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urban politics and urban economics. The squatter dwellings themselves have been variously interpreted: as pitiful improvisation with whatever inferior materials are available to the poor; as ingenious appropriate building technology, using available resources in a far more cost-effective way than official building programs; as a kind of brick-by-brick real-estate development, "consolidation" in the economic and the social as well as the physical sense.  

But since my theme here will be aesthetics, and specifically the politics of aesthetic perception, it seems worthwhile to note at the outset that squatter dwellings do not seem to have been "taken up" as folk art. While the architecture produced by owner improvisation in England has its partisans (there is even a book praising the British suburban, semi-detached style, entitled Dun Roamin'), Bernard Rudofsky's influential Architecture Without Architects dwells fondly on Mediterranean cliff villages and African tribal settlements and gives the Brazilian favela and Venezuelan barrio the go-by. Only in the film "Black Orpheus," so far as I know, have the dwellings of squatters been represented as worth aesthetic attention.

THE BASIS OF AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

Like everyone in this field, I have my own strongly marked views as to the relative appropriateness of each of these contrasting positions. But I wish to begin by arguing here that every one of these views has something to recommend it, some basis in reality. Each is shaped by a particular personal combination of self-interest and experience, but each also picks up some elements in a complex reality, and so is in part a representation of truth. Each, also, helps shape action.

The view of squatters as "peasants in the city" came out of a preoccupation with the rapid growth of cities, especially in Latin America. If people were moving from the countryside to the cities, then the inhabitants of the squatter settlements were most appropriately understood as peasants translated to a foreign world. (This view suited researchers who had little direct contact with the inhabitants of the settlements, and who needed to confirm their presence without actually recognizing them as fellow citizens.) For those who, like Tony and Elizabeth Leeds, came to insist on the truly urban character of life in these settlements, both the fieldwork experience and the political position were basic. They saw urban people with a proper claim on citizenship.

The concept of "marginality" as applied to squatter settlements was first developed as a central theme by Chilean Social Democrats, whose conception also had a political context. Their intention was to build a mass base for their movement. With the unions dominated by the Left, it was those outside the big firms who had to be their constituency, and the appropriate channel was housing and community organization. To see the inhabitants of the settlements as "marginal" was to affirm the importance of incorporation. Analytic concept and prescription for remediation grew together like two branches of the same plant.

The critiques of marginality theory, on the other hand, I believe were largely the work of North American researchers. Being outsiders, it seemed to them natural to see both the "marginals" and their marginalizers as part of a single system.

Although each point of view has to be understood in terms of a particular starting position, there were elements in the situation to which each of these views could relate. The "peasants in the city view" could point to real continuities with rural life, some generated directly by the necessities of the urban setting. For example, the pig fed on garbage was one of the few means of capital accumulation available to the casual laborer trying to pick up an odd job here and there around the market. The bamboo and earth construction of shanties was not necessarily preferred; indeed, I know that it was not; but it was, at any rate, cheap, available, and known as a technique. On the other hand, those who saw the people of the settlements as part of the system could look at them and see that they were coping, often quite ingeniously, with urban conditions in a distinctively urban way: taking up odd trades and novel money-making schemes, organizing settlements, and arranging the political support that made the settlements possible.

The interpretation of squatter settlements and their inhabitants as "marginal" came to seem to me ridiculous, for what sense did it make to treat as "marginal" the people and neighborhoods which constituted a major part of the city, whose tiny commercial enterprises moved the city's goods, and whose underpaid casual labor rendered more profitable corporate production? But the concept did call attention to the exclusion of this part of the population from the "good" neighborhoods, from the unions, and, to a substantial extent, from major channels of political action. Each view was partial, but each view used some elements of reality for its picture of the world.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH THE AESTHETICS OF A SQUATTER SETTLEMENT

For a closer look at the context of aesthetic experience, I offer an account of what I saw in a squatter settlement in Venezuela.
where my husband and I set up residence with our four children. Here we spent two and a half years — some of the most important time in my life. I remember the first view very sharply, although it is now thirty years ago. The location was a squatter neighborhood at the edge of a small and undistinguished commercial city at the edge of the Orinoco River. This was the disorderly existing core around and over which planners were projecting the development of a new industrial growth pole featuring new industry and big corporate investors. In the evening after dinner we had come to meet a couple of Americans who were doing community-development work in this particular small, impoverished neighborhood. While we were talking, we went for a walk on the beach by the Orinoco. The beach was covered with trash, but the trash was little visible at night. There was, however, a full moon in a cloudless sky the beach looked white, and the sheet aluminum roofs of the little dwellings gleamed like silver. I looked up the beach and saw it: a tiny white house with a silver corrugated roof, a dark red band at the base of the whitewashed wall, and a sky-blue wooden door with sky-blue window shutters on each side of it, each visibly out of plumb (FIG. 2).
Once, I fell in love at first sight with a man I saw at one end of my living room juggling. He paused, holding the juggling balls, and looked across the room at me, and it was like being kicked in the stomach. Seeing the little house at the top of the beach in the moonlight was just like that: love at first sight. Next day we came back and bought the house. Although it was small and lacked running water, and although a bar with a noisy jukebox soon was established across the street, the house gave me delight for the two and one half years I lived there with my children. The cement floors were waxed dark green: mopped, they had a marble sheen. At night wind from the river blew through the house via the opening between the thin roof and fragile walls; it was like being inside a shell. At Christmas we hung bright paper on a bare branch tipped with candles, and the colors glowed against the whitewash.

Back in Caracas at the office of the development agency people were rather shocked that we had chosen to live in a “slum.” They were not unreasonable. We had chosen to live in a neighborhood of exceedingly poor people lacking in paved streets, piped water, sewers, or electricity. My colleagues saw a slum where I could see a moon-touched village by the river and, as time went on, people struggling for their future.

Looking back on this odd case of love at first sight, I think that the aesthetics of the little house spoke to me precisely because of those characteristics that the Caracas crowd would have seen as most slummy. It took an American anthropologist struggling for a sense of balance in the modern-technology utopia of a new city-planning project to look up the beach, see fragile beauty at the human scale, and fall in love with exactly that.

AN ALTERNATE AESTHETIC IN JAPAN

Twenty years later in Kyoto I saw that the Emperor of Japan’s tea pavilion was of the same bamboo and earth construction as my shack; and when I read an essay on Japanese aesthetics, I recognized in the four principles of Japanese taste identified there the very elements that had moved me on that moonlight night in Venezuela (FIG. 3). These principles are suggestion, irregularity, simplicity and perishability. These were principles that spoke to me at that moment as my husband and I contemplated fitting our domestic life, with our four children, into the work context of a planning team focused on corporate investment and economic growth. Like the Japanese Emperor, we appropriated a pre-industrial tradition for its symbolism in our very non-traditional lives.

But in the context of a growing city in Venezuela in the sixties it was impossible for my neighbors to see the house as I did. There was, in the first place, no established alternative aesthetic in the society to which to appeal.

AESTHETIC MODERNISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

One aspect of settling and building among both squatters and city planners was a kind of politics of aesthetic modernism. This aesthetic politics was the physical counterpart, the sign and symbol, of “progress” as capitalist growth. It joined a taste for the industrially produced material — plastic rather than wood, say — with that “blending and confusion of the elements of expensiveness and of beauty” that Thorstein Veblen identified long ago as “pecuniary canons of taste.” The large, the pricey-looking, the new and shiny were what the inhabitants of my town, from the planners and bureaucrats down to the lowliest squatter, saw as worth admiration. The development corporation saw its task of building an admirable city as involving the construction of broad avenues, a large glossy administration building for the steel mill, and an elaborate agency headquarters. These big projects were what engaged their passions: they had little interest in shade trees, bus stops, and other small-scale and relatively inexpensive amenities. They were guided by exactly the same aesthetic principles, the same pecuniary canons of taste, that
guided my neighbor when he replaced a sloped roof and a shaded front corridor with a cement-block facade and grilled front windows. Squatter and planner differed — and differed tremendously — in the resources they could deploy. The fact that the squatter building so evidently engages only a tiny fraction of the monetary cost displayed in the government or corporate project was what helped to establish both buildings and builders in their relative positions in a single hierarchy both of pecuniary standards of taste and social position. But they did not differ in any essential way in the principles that animated action. The visiting Americans may have been the only group around provided with an alternative standard of judgement.

I wonder if a different aesthetic among some of the rich, one of hand craft and understatement, would have served as a model for my neighbors, validating their use of inexpensive traditional materials and making it possible for them to
EQUILIBRIUM BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS IN JAPANESE CULTURE

One of the various ways in which the Japanese go on being remarkable is that they have managed to maintain in full flower two strongly contrasting aesthetic traditions. There is, on the one hand, the tradition of suggestion, irregularity, simplicity and perishability, rendered in the Japanese garden, and in the tea ceremony with its oiled wood, earth and bamboo technology. On the other hand, there is the modernism of high technology, steel, and glass. The Japanese do this very well too. The two traditions do borrow from each other. I have seen in photographs a stunningly beautiful “garden” consisting of a cement-block enclosure with natural lighting, within which were displayed, with artful casualness, an oiled table and bamboo dipper. On the other hand, Issey Miyake’s dress designs — I should say the most creative haute couture in the world — borrow from the kimono. But the two aesthetic traditions develop in parallel, without getting mixed up with each other. A Tokyo middle-class house will have a room for the tea ceremony, all oiled wood and rush mats, and next to it a living room crammed with sofa, overstuffed chairs, television, fish tank, and velvet hanging of the Stag at Eve. Next to a meticulously maintained traditional village with canals running through it is a modern shopping mall, far glitzier than anything we could dream up in the United States; and yet the two are wholly separate. And very much unlike the case of Venezuela, in Japan one tradition is not thought of as an improvement on (progress away from) the other. Each tradition, in its own way, is one that Veblen would have recognized as representing conspicuous consumption. The businessman who can afford to have his offices furnished in steel, glass and leather will also be able to indulge in a traditional garden tea house, and may very well do so. The Emperor takes tea within earth and bamboo walls, appropriating and developing to the highest degree of refinement a tradition coming from pre-industrial times.

A SOCIETY WITH A SINGLE AESTHETIC

Neither the architects and urban designers of the development agency nor the squatter-builders by the Orinoco had such an alternative aesthetic for reference. Both the agency people and the squatters, of course, knew about and could refer to traditional rural building. The bamboo and earth walls of my little house could be explained as drawing on tradition for practicality; like the sheet aluminum roof, they were a least-cost solution. But the builders did not need to paint the door and shutters blue, wax the cement floor that wonderful marably green, or run that band of dark red along the base of the wall. Each of these touches may well have evoked family, childhood, some swept-earth yard with a clump of bananas. But they could not take the same satisfaction in these evocations that the Emperor does in his justly famous earth-wall tea house. For the Venezuelans, “Progress” summons, and Progress was pricey and plastic.

Nor could the resort to traditional be established as part of a communal “folk” tradition separate from the tastes of the elite. The context for building, as for other activities, was more than simply local, and the neighborhood had neither the internal integration nor the self-defining qualities that we think of when we speak of a “community.” Organizers and local leaders out to mobilize work on a water line or a meeting center often spoke of the neighborhood as “a community,” but the term was more an organizational device than a description. Among the less than five hundred residents, many were recent arrivals, and it was not the case that everyone knew everyone else. The collective endeavors to build this or that “community” project never in any instance engaged the participation of more than a tiny fraction of the local residents. Political allegiances reached outside the local; there were active members of the dominant Accion Democratica Party and of the minority parties, and there were, I knew, people who listened to the clandestine radio station and aided the guerrillas. Peoples’ plans for their children did not involve staying in place but getting educated, moving up. The aesthetics of building were shaped accordingly; they were formed by a view of the world as changing, as offering opportunities for individual progress, as being a place in which one looked beyond the neighborhood in space and away from the past in time for models of success.

The owners of the little house would have been even more nonplussed than the planners back in Caracas had I tried to tell them of my feelings about their home. (They accepted our offer of a little over a thousand dollars cash without hesitation, and began packing up their few pieces of furniture to move to another squatter area a couple of miles away. As a parting gift, they presented us with a seedling of an almendron tree, growing in a coffee can.) People in my barrio did not romanticize the fragile, the rural, or the traditional. Both the building technique and the style of the house we bought evoked small-settlement roots, but to the builders the solu-
tion was dictated by poverty. Any family with a regular source of income would try as rapidly as possible to replace the bamboo and earth walls with cement block, and the existing style, with its overhanging roof shading a paved corridor, with an ornamental facade something like the false-front architecture of old Western towns. A little more economic leeway and there would be a front garden with ornamental metal fencing and metal grilles over the windows. Such a house would no longer be called by the rather deprecat­
ing term of rancho, but could be called a quintica, a poor man’s imitation of the rich man’s quinta.

The theme of modern aspirations, which made the street front of the quintica so important, could rarely be carried all the way through the house from front to back, but people would do what they could. Almost invariably the front room had couple of modern plastic chairs, perhaps a sofa, a coffee table with a shiny painted vase or ornament, and on the wall perhaps a framed picture of a blond girl with an automobile. We Americans relished sleeping in hammocks — cooler, tidier, space-saving, altogether more elegant than beds. But in almost all the other ranchos, there would be at least one bed, although rarely beds for all (the overflow would have to sleep in hammocks at the rear). There might be a refrigerator and modern stove in the kitchen, although these were rela­
tively rare, and most people cooked on kerosene. By the time one got to the rear of the house, the public-presentation aspects were much weaker, and in the back yard one would find dishwashing going on in an enamel basin on a deal table and perhaps a coop of chickens. But this gradient from front to back, from the modern and commercial to the more traditional, was thought of by the barrio people as a gradient also from better to inferior.

BUILDING AS A CLAIM TO RESPECT

If one were to ask the planners in Caracas what defined my rancho and its neighborhood as a “slum,” they would have pointed out a number of features which appear at first sight to be objective criteria. One was the cheap and perishable character of the materials out of which the dwelling was made: bamboo lath, earth plaster, whitewash, and corrugated aluminum — as a visitor from Reynolds Aluminum later remarked, “the next grade up from aluminum foil.” But, as I have said, I loved the fragility of those materials and the rough texture of the whitewashed earth walls. They were even practical: every time I went interviewing back in the middle-class parts of town I was struck by how much cooler our flimsy shelter by the river was than those more sub­stantial dwellings. There was also the absence of running water, sewers, street pav ing, trash collection. These were, indeed, inconveniences. But they were, strictly speaking, not exactly deficiencies of the housing but of the system of public provision. The construction characteristics and the service deficiencies do, however, have a common attribute; they represent attributes which are devalued and devaluing. People who live in this way are thought of as people to be looked down on. That is why the energy that goes into housing improvement in a barrio like mine is as much a drive for respect as it is for comfort.

Even as I continued to love our little fragile house by the beach, I came to respect — yes, to admire — the domestic heroism represented by the evolution from rancho to quintica. I came to understand that the quintica with its plastic living room furniture set was part of a heroic struggle for more than bare survival: a struggle to assert, to present, to show forth as a full participant in the building of a new, modern city and society. The claim to modernity was a claim for respect and for citizenship.

Witold Rybczynski’s charming essay on architecture, The Most Beautiful House in the World, concludes by finding that the “most beautiful house in the world” for him is the house he built for himself — starting with the idea of a boat shed, and gradually evolving into a habitation. It is beautiful because it carries a freight of personal associations, meanings, evocations — what the Japanese aesthete would call “suggestion.” Rybczynski speaks of “the moving loveliness of human occup­
ation, of a place transformed,” and he sees that the house built by its owner is most likely to carry purely and intensely this sense of the shaping human hand and vision. He notes that “Building your own home — and inhabiting a space of your own making — is considered by most to be a luxury,” and adds in a footnote: “Paradoxically, it is a luxury that almost all poor people in the so-called underdeveloped world enjoy.”

He is right, of course — in a way. But there are some issues he is missing. As one who has lived among squatters by the Orinoco, and as one who later designed and built my own little house on a hill in Vermont (my most beautiful house), I think I can speak somewhat to those issues. They are not, as I have said, simply issues of rudimentary materials, or of lack of services. They are issues of social context and, there­fore, of social meaning. The personal meaning that my rancho had for me, fragile beauty at the human scale, was not violated by a sense of social inferiority. Neither the respect of others for me, nor my own respect for myself, was tied to pecuniary canons of taste with respect to the house. Indeed, the very fact that the house was a rancho made a kind of statement about where my allegiances lay in the project
world, which I liked making. The context for my neighbors was different.

**SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN DESIGN**

In the several decades since I lived beside the Orinoco some things have changed for the better with respect to the context of squatter building. In the first place, thanks to the work of John Turner and others, it has become widely understood that incremental building by families, with whatever paid labor they choose to employ, is both an economically efficient and a more user-adaptive form of building than the government project. The economies of scale promised by government materials and directed building have largely been shown to be as illusory as the economies of scale promised earlier by prefabrication. The result of mass design and government building has been smaller and costlier dwellings than those which people are generally able to mobilize for themselves. In any event, governments have neither the will nor the resources to build for all, and “second-best solutions” comprising interventions into an essentially private building process are what is in the realm of the possible. This set of understandings has now been widely diffused through the urban-planning professions.

Another change in context has occurred in the aesthetics of modern urban design, at least in the developed world. The large and gleaming is still the mark of prestige building, but along with this aesthetic has come an interest in evoking the historic involving the renovation of old buildings, usually with the addition of brick and cobblestone and trees. Government here shows its power not by dramatizing the State via a visual as well as a practical amenity. Trees shade and ornament. A well-designed bus stop or a public telephone can be visual evidence that this neighborhood is cared for, its residents considered as citizens (FIG. 4).

When I put it like this, we see at once that we are talking politics: the politics of the aesthetic. Of course, the institutions which manage economic and political power are not inclined to encourage — much less to ornament and celebrate — the irregularities of architecture without architects. John Turner’s work on squatter settlements as “the solution” rather than “the problem” was taken up by the World Bank only to be transformed into the bureaucratized uniformity of the sites-and-services project.

Likewise, Socialism has done nothing to support the development of a vernacular architecture of neighborhoods; indeed, I think it is fair to say that Socialist governments have built to glorify both state power and modernism. Even while the Cuban Revolution was producing an architecture of elegant and efficient bus stops, its Housing Ministry was moving to shift people out of irregular settlements into large apartment blocks on the Soviet model.

But the same considerations apply to any of the “practical” recommendations about tenure and water lines we often find ourselves making. They also will not happen unless the people of the barrios have been able to make their weight felt politically. The public architecture of bus stops, telephone kiosks, and steps responds to neighborhood power in the political system by celebrating the neighborhood aesthetically. But the causality runs both ways. If the settlements no longer strike the outsider as “marginal” or as “disorderly slums,” their political position will be at least a little improved. If their residents do not look like “peasants in the city,” but like families building in an urban framework, the residents will have somewhat clearer standing as citizens. Furthermore, I suppose that the family builders themselves

How could we help the barrio builder benefit from these two trends — the acceptance of owner-builder housing as efficient and a new taste for variability? We already know that the barrio builder needs security of tenure in order to keep investing his earnings and his sweat in the building process. We also know that the barrio builder cannot deal with services on his own; government must make it possible to get the water lines in, the sewage disposed of, the trash collected.

But we might think about aesthetic policy too. The devices which make an abandoned warehouse in central Boston look valued and valuable are applicable also to the squatter settlement. The steps which zigzag the slopes of the favela can be a visual as well as a practical amenity. Trees shade and ornament. A well-designed bus stop or a public telephone can be visual evidence that this neighborhood is cared for, its residents considered as citizens (FIG. 4).

We have to be clear that this new aesthetic approach has not so far, and probably will never, come to embrace real freedom for variable building or building that is detectable that of poor people. In the shopping area that Rouse designed for Boston, the role taken in the model by the hand that tossed in the baubles and feathers is played by a management which insists on passing on the appropriateness of the goods sold in every single push cart; even the street jugglers are auditioned and scheduled. But there is, nevertheless, a change here in the standards of taste that may be useful.
A masonry stair not only makes a safe climb out of a slippery slope, but it also gives the settlement an air of permanence. Source: E.G. Popko, Transitions: A Photographic Documentary of Squatter Settlements (Stroudsburg, Penn.: Dowden Hutchinson and Ross, 1983).
may come to be less driven by pecuniary canons of taste. Neighborhood power, confirmed by neighborhood-centered public amenities, might support a confident vernacular architecture of local builders which might — although not necessarily — incorporate rural tradition without apology.

Finally, we ourselves might benefit from experimenting in the field of aesthetic politics. We might free up our part of town from those aggressive highrises, those uncomfortable plazas, those sheets of glass requiring expensive summer air conditioning. Let us insist that we will no longer suffer in obedience to the aesthetics of corporate power, but will move to a more humane architecture. That will require our developing appropriate forms of political organization.

To conclude: the notion of aesthetic politics can lead us in two directions. One is toward analysis: What are the interests and purposes that shape aesthetic perception? The second direction is to suggest for us forms of action or ways in which the designer can enact social commitment as the very center of practice.

REFERENCE NOTES

11. For an early and important example, see D. Collier, Squatters and Oligarchs: Authoritarian Rule and Policy Change in Peru (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).