

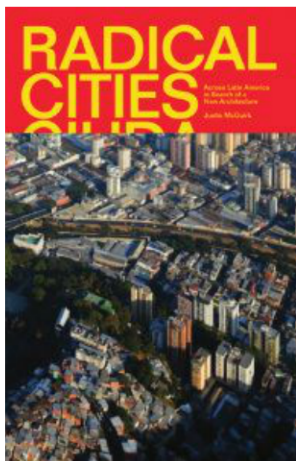
Books

**Radical Cities:
Across Latin America in Search
of a New Architecture**

Justin McGuirk
Verso, 288pp, £18

Pushpa Arabindoo is inspired by a sensitive investigation of activist architecture in Latin America.

Verso's description of *Radical Cities* as 'the Motorcycle Diaries of architecture' is understandable given that the publisher had, in the mid-1990s, produced a fine English translation of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's *The Motorcycle Diaries: A Journey around South America*. There are parallels: both are road trips through a continent forever at the brink of some kind of social, political and spatial revolution. While for Guevara, the journey allowed a confrontation with the impossibility of capitalism, for Justin McGuirk, it is an opportunity to hammer another nail in the coffin of a utopian modernism that many would assume is safely buried. Nevertheless, such a gesture seems essential as he travels across time and space, dipping into the past to get a better grip on the present.



He begins in Mexico City, at the twentieth-century's largest social housing experiment, Nonoalco-Tlatelolco, which proudly signalled the arrival of Euro-American modernist city building ideas in Latin America, a rationalist vision that failed to address the uncontrollable growth of the informal city. McGuirk more usefully charts a Turneresque revival of the kind of housing projects initiated by an emerging breed of activist architects who use radical references and modest 'acupuncture-like' interventions in the city to recover architecture's social purpose.

Many of these architects are well-known, with quite a few trained in elite western schools. Some even have enviable teaching positions in Euro-American universities, and their projects have been published as 'successful' examples of home-grown methodologies. Several of these works constitute the focus of the book's investigation, but unlike the sure-shot confidence in these vanguard solutions displayed by the magazines, McGuirk's self-confessedly unscientific yet sensitive impressions unpack a more complex narrative. As he goes in search of 'a generation of optimists', he doesn't hesitate to question the Chilean practice Elemental's desire to preserve its innovative and now well-known project of building half a house when there is the possibility of building a whole house if a bigger

budget would allow it. He thus finds architects' efforts either bogged down by architectural language, or struggling to extend beyond the gestural, as he notes of Urban-Think Tank's efforts in Caracas, where 'urbanism is frozen politics'.

There are some harsh lessons for these activist architects as they find that the normative programmatic brief simply doesn't work. Thus, in a most revealing part of the book, McGuirk brings us to Alto Comedero, built by the radical social movement Túpac Amaru in northern Argentina, where a new kind of urbanism is being tested – a combination of exurbia, Disney theme park and radical socialism. Here, community facilities such as a vast swimming pool and Jurassic-themed playground more suited to the 'haves' nestle within rows of single-storey houses for the 'have-nots'. Besides a sports court, the community centre includes an Office of Good Ideas, Department of Human Rights, a radio station and an MRI scanner. This is not your average community-led development and is difficult to categorise. At this point one wishes the author risked a detour from a tight itinerary to explore further this socialist utopia to see if there is more to it than meets the eye. McGuirk experiences this dilemma again as he visits Torre David in Caracas, a 47-storey squatted tower that is neither skyscraper nor slum, and which was savagely

portrayed in the recent TV series *Homeland*. As he collects narratives from the residents of this new kind of informal living, he is sometimes unsure what is real and what is fiction. Yet this is one of the most enlightening chapters, with a bizarrely Ballardian scenario coming alive in a city where squatting is the norm, and from where vertical informality may very well be launched as the feature of the twenty-first-century city.

McGuirk's journey draws to a close as he returns to Mexico at the boundary of San Diego/Tijuana, which the maverick urbanist Teddy Cruz calls 'the political equator'. Here, oddly, a city like San Diego can learn useful lessons from its southern neighbour and 'the ineluctable logic of the informal city'.

As he reflects on the possibility for the experience of Latin America to find new relevance across what was once an unbridgeable divide, McGuirk's round-trip seems complete, his reasons for foraging into Latin America making even better sense – indeed, it leaves the reader tempted to undertake similar adventures elsewhere across the globe. It is in inspiring such urges that the book surpasses its own modesty.

Pushpa Arabindoo trained as an architect and urban designer. She is a co-director of the UCL Urban Laboratory where her focus is on cities of the global South.

Above Houses at Iquique, by Elemental; the half-complete, squatted Torre David in Caracas, Venezuela (recently evicted).