

Sculptures of ruins

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Digging architecture to tell Bogotá' story

INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago, Colombia's capital and biggest city, Bogotá, started an urban transformation that contributed to change the international reputation and perception of this megalopolis of eight million people. Under the direction of its mayor Enrique Peñalosa, the city has developed a regulatory frame for urban planning that provided new public instruments and a renovation of local institutions, among other improvements following the constant and important growing of the city's population. As a matter of fact, due to a complex political situation in Colombia, Bogotá had to face a faster population growth than the suburban areas¹. Parallel to this urban transformation, the government started a cultural policy consisting in recuperating the cultural and historical heritage of the capital. This took place in the context of consolidation processed by the State over its territory, its population and the governmental institutions. These transformations were particularly visible in the historical centre of the city, La Candelaria, which comprises the most prestigious institutions of power: the plaza Bolivar, bounded by the Casa Narino (headquarter of the presidency), the Parliament, the Justice Palace and the cathedral to the East.

In terms of architecture and style, the centre of Bogotá reflects the system of values and tastes prevailing among the local elites that used to inhabit the space at the beginning of the twentieth century². Willing to show a modern and civilized image of their environment to the world and to foreign investors, the elites took the charge of the transformation of the city centre in a pursuit of progress, as the urban space was becoming a factor of development. In this particular economic and political context, the research for an overcoming of the traditional colonial model of the city lead architects to look for references of European (particularly French and British) and American styles, in order to identify the modern Bogotá with the ideals of Democracy embodied by those three countries.

Between the 1910s and the 1990s, a constant idea of progress lead the Colombian bourgeoisie to present a linear History of Colombia, in which progress seemed the absolute

¹ Juan Pablo Bocarejo and Luis Eduardo Tafur, « Urban Land Use Transformation Driven by an Innovative Transportation Project, Bogotá, Colombia. », *Case study prepare for the Global Report on Human Settlements*, 2013

² Charlie Weibel, À la recherche du temps perdu: récupération du centre historique de Bogotá, enjeux d'une politique du symbole, (Master diss., University of Lyon 2, 2008).

value at the expense of tradition. Despite this mutation of the architecture toward progress, it has been twenty years that the progress is no longer seen as the norm. As a matter of fact, the protection of the cultural and historical heritage now becomes the cutting edge in terms of development for the city's landscape, fostering the creation of urban reforms laws by the government.

Hence, this essay focuses on the weaving of historical discourse throughout architecture and its substantial transformation, to reflect ideas of progress according to the values carried along by the State and its elites. Through the work of Colombian artist Leyla Cárdenas, I wish to interrogate and decipher the logic of storytelling underlying such urbanistic changes.

Leyla Cárdenas considers herself as a sculptor whose work could be compared to the scientific discipline of archaeology of the recent past. Haunted by the idea of memory and history of Bogotá, her work endeavours to encapsulate the particularities of the places she explores in order to discover the layers and physical qualities constituting a particular building as a mark of change in the History of her nation. Following a path into the materiality of the images she encounters, the artist explores and eventually discovers the memories attached to each layer, unveiling the intersection of different temporal experiences: historical, material, mundane, existential and psychological. With the analytical look of the archaeologist, she then attempts to reconstruct the contexts related to those various fragments, translating a certain reality of the stratigraphic ubiquity of the materials into her sculptures and installations.

In her most recent works, Cárdenas uses the photographs of buildings located in the centre of Bogotá, taken before their transformation into alternative spaces for contemporary art and cultural events. As a matter of fact, in Bogotá, each building constructed more than thirty years ago becomes eligible to demolition³. Throughout images and installations apparatus, Cárdenas thus reveals spectres of time and offers to the viewers an alternative vision of the site.

This essay aims to show to which extent Cárdenas' strategy of vision challenges the historical strategies put into place by the Colombian State to recuperate the discourse surrounding cultural heritage, particularly architecture. This essay will focus on one piece made by Cárdenas in 2015 in Espacio Odeón, a cultural space located in the heart of the historical neighbourhood of Bogotá, La Candelaria. To a certain extent, one should ask how Cárdenas' work challenges the History of this building and what it allows to make as a

³ Gabriela Sáenz Laverde, « Leyla Cárdenas y la geología de Bogotá », *Revista diners*, 18/04/2017, DOI: http://revistadiners.com.co/artes/44644_leyla-cardenas-la-geologia-bogota/, [last visit the 12/03/2018]

reflexion on the city's transformation between the 1910s and the 1990s. To resume those reflections in a broader question, this essay will try to argue on the ways we can discuss History narrated throughout Architecture.

The first part of the argument will analyse the relationships between ruins and History, and the relative positions of ruins and architecture toward historiographical strategies. The second part will focus on the nature of the art piece itself and its techniques of creation, notably its relationship with the science of archaeology. Thanks to the scientific apparatus and the materiality of the building, the artwork attracts the viewers into a past almost palpable but yet seemingly unreachable. Nevertheless, the presence of materiality in the artwork asserts its authenticity and forces the audience to face a certain idea of reality. Finally, the third part will interrogate the aesthetical dimension of the piece and its links with politics. The position in space and the choices made by the artist recall the unrevealed stories that a State choose not to tell its people. Beyond nostalgia, Cárdenas' work takes the viewers in the quest for meaning and answers, while encouraging them to look for signs inside the building and their own memories.

1. BEYOND THE WALL, UNVEILING STORIES

The suggestive power of ruins is immense; their presence bear on the material environment and on people's minds⁴. When one is facing ruins, rubbles of a building that used to stand in its splendour or its simplicity, the immediate question comes: what was there? How was the life in here? There is a direct relationship with ruins and memories, or histories that have been told and are still made up in people's mythologies. Yet, the archaeological ruins and the romantic ruins, even if they are not discussed on the same level of "objectiveness", raise the same reflection upon understanding the past, and through this reflection, our own present, possibly even our future.

The piece *Trama* (Warp) was made by Leyla Cárdenas in 2015 and presented in the Espacio Odeón, situated in the central neighbourhood of La Candelaria, in Bogotá. This cultural centre holds in its wall a cultural and political history of the Colombian capital, that traces back to the nation-building process started by political leaders in the decades following the independence of the country in 1810. During the 1930s, the building opened as a movie theatre called Cinema Odeón, which happened to be the first cinema in Colombia. Since then, its walls recorded the events of its history of violence and suffering among the various

⁴ Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Imperial debris: on Ruins and Ruination*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2013, p. 2

political regimes that carried the transformation of the city until recently. In 1948, the building was damaged in a political revolt known as the Bogotazo, before it was reconstructed by a young culture group and opened again in the 1963 to become the Popular Theater of Bogotá. Finally, after it fell into abandonment during the 1990s, a private investor purchased the building in 2010 to turn it into a cultural space⁵.

Trama was created as a site-specific piece for the Espacio Odeón. Its consists in a large piece of weaving, made after an archive photograph of the river San Francisco and one of its bridge that used to stand at the precise place where the building is located today. Outside, the river has been replaced by the Avenue Jimenez, which conducts to the gallery and the centre of La Candelaria. Hanging from the ceiling and the walls of the last floor of the building, the piece shows an image of ruin of the city, as it stood for its former inhabitants in the 1910s – 1920s. The multiple threads that start from the weaving serve as cables to fix the tapestry to the walls (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 & 2: Views of *Trama* in *Espacio Odeón*, Leyla Cárdenas, 2015.

Source: <http://www.espacioodeon.com/programacion/artesplasticas/trama>

Due to its large scale and its location in the building, it is impossible for the visitors to see the entire installation from only one point of view. One has to move inside the space and take the stairs to access the different layers of material embedded in this installation. On the last floor, the artist included some pieces in the wall, inlaying parts of the story inside the decrepit painting of the former theatre (Fig. 2 & 3).

⁵ Anny Woolridge, « A brief introduction to Espacio Odeón and What's on this Season », The Culture Trip, accessed May 1 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/south-america/colombia/articles/a-brief-introduction-to-espacio-odeon-and-whats-on-this-season/>



Fig. 3: view of the piece in the wall – cables and threads. Fig. 3 bis: detail. Fig. 4: letters and threads in the wall
Source: <http://www.espacioodeon.com/programacion/artesplasticas/trama>

Seemingly emerging from the photograph on the wall, the weaving is linked to the structure of the building while being suspended over the void. The text takes all its importance in the interpretation of the piece, as it allows the viewer to situate the photograph in time and space. Words are employed as part of the weaving, tracing back the marks of History that those walls include.

By engaging with the materiality of the ruins that characterize this building, Leyla Cárdenas invites us to contemplate the remnants of an unfolded story, while distilling drops of temporality throughout the references to politics, capitalism, development, in the name of which we understand the walls have been transformed. Looking closely at the historical references the artist makes of the notions of public space, economics, allows the viewer to connect the image to the words, as an alternative voice to the official one. Hence, the central piece of the installation stimulates the physical presence of the ruin by “reflecting” its images on the walls, while maintaining this complex relation with history in the present, materialized in the cables hammered to the floor.

The artist’s analysis of the palimpsest constituted by the building, itself a central node of time, spaces, interpretations, histories and memories, allows us to conduct a reflection on the urban and architectural reforms carried by successive governments, in order to fulfil their goal for modernization. Indeed, since the building’s interiority runs through many historical periods, its own story remains autonomous from the politics of the State, except when its apparatus attempts to control the language of its architecture⁶.

As argued by Gevork Hartoonian, “while ruins can inform social modes of organization, as marginalized structures which cease to function in ways they once did, they also create a sense of irretrievability of futures lost”⁷. According to the common sense, ruins can provide a

⁶ Gevork Hartoonian, What is the matter with architectural history? (pp. 182-196).

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 7.

favoured image of a vanished past, something beyond repair and possibly in decay, but which has been turned into aesthetic relief by the passage of time and nature's growth. Often linked to the idea of nostalgia, ruins appear in the present as symbols of vulnerability, damage, refusing to give a neutral sense of what they suggest to the viewer. To Walter Benjamin, ruins are traces that mark the fragility of power and the force of destruction (*The Origin of Tragic Drama*, New York and London, 1977). Thus, looking for ruins and looking at ruins allow us to trace back the livelihoods and social afterlife of structures and things in material debris, to decrypt in a sense the durable substance of signs, in which the effects of history are reactivated and preserved, building on the idea that "ruins hold histories, and ruins are the ground on which histories are contested and remade"⁸.

Furthermore, as defined by Lazzara, ruins can be read as much as destruction as a form of construction of alternative stories, and futures⁹. With her work *Trama*, Cárdenas digs in Bogotá's architecture to retrieve the interactions of a specific site with both its spatial and temporal dimensions. Reading the building as a palimpsest, the material as a kind of sediment, a document revealing its successive stratum and histories, one can confront oneself with present, past and future. Hence, Cárdenas' work on ruins and their image carry the paradox of an history that shaped the neighbourhood of La Candelaria. As a matter of fact, she reveals images' inability to show and present what they refer to: the theatre, the destruction of the natural landscape, the natural resources buried under a concrete screed. Fragments, as an absence of information, create an analogy between visible and void, reflecting on the role of imagination and myth in the construction of the historical narrative of the city. She superposes different views of the same building, thus creating a visual dialogue between present and past, replacing the insufficient information given by the photographs by the ruins themselves: "I like that the image then presents itself as this inert weight holding poorly from the wall, but its collapse and complete fragmentation is inevitable"¹⁰.

What does fragmentation mean and how can it draw us to look closely, otherwise, to architecture? This second part will explore the material and scientific dimension of the work, that sustains a credible view over the past and fosters a deeper exploration of the building and its related memories.

⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁹ Michael Lazzara and Vicky Unruh, *Telling ruins in Latin America*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009.

¹⁰ Leyla Cárdenas on her website: <http://lehila.net/index.php/other-projects/permutations-study2/>, [last visit the 11/03/2018]

2. CRITICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Cárdenas' artistic gesture starts with a scientific investigation which aims to reveal the stories of the building. Using archaeological methods, she removes layers after layers clues that allow us to understand the building from traces and signs left by the passage of time. By means of this archaeological method, she underlies the destructive impact of progress as carried on by the Colombian state. As stated before, during the past fifteen years, a massive urban renaissance took place in Bogotá under the mayoralty of Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2000). Peñalosa's call to the best architects to achieve a more beautiful and human-scale city lead the capital to receive the Golden Lion Cities Award at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale¹¹. Consequently, "this architectural performance implicitly transposed on to the urban landscape a significant rhetorical shift in government tactics, and a characterisation of violence in which the notion of victimhood was constantly used to support increasingly aggressive state military activities on a national scale¹²." The destruction of the landscape and the shift from a rural-based to an increasingly urban-based society in Bogotá aimed to the construction of a new kind of urban identity. Hence, the construction of buildings like the Espacio Odeón and their role in implementing ideological discourses of modernity in the city, is closely related to the progressive yet definitive exclusion of certain social classes outside the limits of a positive urban visual imagery.

In performing the architecture and providing an access to the material for memorial and documentary purposes, Cárdenas' artwork engages the public body inside the space and triggers a sort of remembrance process of the city. To translate the past of the building, she uses two interlinked and useful ways to explain her work: storytelling and manifest. We shall imagine here to see the artwork in situation, as if we have lived in the city for decades. Archaeological methods, digging into spaces to retrieve fragments of realities, can provide alternative accounts of history. As argued by Alferdo Gonzáles-Ruibal in his essay on Supermodernity, "archaeology is about documenting the scene of a crime and reconstructing a story from the remains¹³". If the story told by *Trama* does not seem to include any form of violence at first sight, one could imagine the effects of such transformations in Bogotá's landscape, during the period of the appropriation by the State in the 1990s. Indeed, "each and every demolition of a building erased the perspective of a fundamental – and foundational – memory of the city. This was not only an architectural memory and a social and cultural

¹¹ Lorenzo Castro and Alejandro Echeverri, « Bogotá and Medellín – Architecture and Modernity », p. 96.

¹² María Estrada-Fuentes, « Performing Bogotá : memories of an urban bombing », *Performing cities*, p. 239.

¹³ Alferdo Gonzáles-Ruibal, « Time to destroy – an Archaeology of Supermodernity », *Current Anthropology*, vol. 49, no. 2, April 2008, p. 240

memory, but also an intangible patrimony, constituted by a kind of narrativity that relies on nothing but orality as the ground of its existence.¹⁴ As our own bodies bear the traces of memories we lost, buildings bear the memory's marks, the painful traces of our lives¹⁵. Hence, the problem of narration and storytelling is that it leads us to overlook other possible modes of engagement with the materiality of the recent past, explains Alferdo González-Ruibal (*Time to destroy – An archaeology of Supermodernity*, p. 250). The purpose of archaeology, as applied to the case of *Trama*, is to deploy an alternative rhetoric of the past, doing justice to the records Cárdenas chooses to work with and opening it to new interpretations of the disappearance and the remnants.

In engaging with the material of the building itself, Cárdenas brings the possibility to translate the material into an immaterial story that can translate alternative narratives about recent events, in the most poetical yet political ways. The presence of archives and ruins in her work asserts its relative objectivity of what has been and destroyed then transformed. This intake of materiality, which can be seen as a trace of objectivity, has the possibility to open our sensibility and interest for the most mundane things that surround us as inhabitants of a city, therefore desublimating the political fantasy of the real by transforming architecture in a tangible object in itself¹⁶.

3. OVERCOMING NOSTALGIA

Following this reflection on objectivity and the meaning that materiality bears toward our perceptions, this part will analyse the gaze induced by such artwork on the building.

By its position in the space it reveals to the spectators, the artwork creates a spectacular view toward the past that invites us to remember. With those extracts of reality, the artist seeks to translate the contradictory absence of the building in the public realm. Cárdenas meditates on these artworks as illustrations of “History repeating itself: vicious circles and accumulation of thresholds that lead nowhere¹⁷.” Here, the reflection on the visible and the invisible effects of destruction in the name of the city's urban renewal and redevelopment results in the “excavation” of an image of the foundation of the building that was almost demolished before being recuperated to become a cultural space. When discussing about another of her work that uses the same kind of visual strategy, Cárdenas shades light on the

¹⁴ Rolf Abderhalden Cortés, « Witness to the Ruins: an artist's testimony », *Telling ruins in Latin America*, p. 212.

¹⁵ Sandra Lorenzano, « Angels among ruins », *Op. cit.* p. 249

¹⁶ González-Ruibal, « Time to destroy », p. 260.

¹⁷ Leyla Cárdenas cited in « *Especular* (Threshold) : Leyla Cárdenas, Curated by Chon Noriega, Presented by LACMA and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Centre », *LA Art Show*, DOI: <https://www.laartshow.com/especular/>, [last visit the 12/03/2018]

visual power of *Trama*: “although in the midst of being demolished, this historical house became a valuable repository of raw material referencing the nation’s reconstitution process and consequent failed attempts at modernizing¹⁸.” As the artist explains on her website, the presence rendered throughout the visual material represents the ruins of the nation-building project itself: “From the few remaining examples of architecture of this period you can tell a lot of what was going on with its citizens at the time, a moment for dreams of modernization and the collective embracing a promised better future. Seeing them in this state of decay only shows yet another example of a certain failure or simply a change of plans.¹⁹”

Engaging with the notions of memory and loss, Cárdenas gives a voice to the stories behind the images. This introduction of the ruins into the photographs gives a trace of other times which triggers a particular memory experience. Indeed, site-specific installations are aesthetical testimonies of a particular chapter of the city’s history, carrying its violence and its wounds. Throughout the threads and the words used in her installation, Cárdenas builds a meaning out of the repetition of the signs she found in the site. The piece rises in the middle of the building, as the ghost of a city’s part that used to be visible to its inhabitant. Bringing back those remnants of Bogotá from the layers of the floor, the ceiling and the walls, she transmits this idea of a story that seems to repeat itself, a city that is almost about to happen. The tension emanates from the threads as bridges over the gap of history, just as the bridge that used to cross the San Francisco river, where stands now the Espacio Odeón. Thus, the image emerging in this void can be seen as a testimony of the local landscape in a city that is still growing. Following this path, the multiple threads become as many voices and images overlapping each other. Finally, this converges with the subsequent images’ efficiency as bearers of meaning described by Vilém Flusser²⁰:

Images are significant surfaces. Images signify – mainly – something ‘out there’ in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions). This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as ‘imagination’. It is the precondition for the production and decoding of images.

¹⁸ Paula Bossa, « Excision », *Art Position*, Art Basel, Miami, 2012. DOI: <http://lehila.net/index.php/rock/excision/>

¹⁹ Leyla Cardenás, on her website: <http://lehila.net/index.php/other-projects/extracts-of-permutations/>

²⁰ Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, London, Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 8.

CONCLUSION

Leyla Cárdenas' work attempts to reveal complexities and failures of the past across images of the city centre of Bogotá. By showing ruins she chooses a point in History and tells a story of the city and its development. Her work fosters us to look at the past and architecture through photographs and ruins set in a spectacular way in the space it tells the story's. Rivers replaced by streets and avenues adapted for the growing urban population, new buildings symbolizing the glory and power of the nation are now being recuperated in order to fulfil this constant, seemingly never satisfied –maybe because never achieved– desire of progress and memory. Although she renders visible the spectre of a city that has been, landscapes that have been transformed in the name of the ideals of progress and modernity of the nation, Leyla Cárdenas invites us to the voyage into memories of buildings that have carried varied identities throughout decades.

With *Trama*, the artist's aim is to display a certain image of the void of the city that, in her opinion, failed to come into being, while still willing to develop. The threads are used to weave stories of histories which has not been told yet. As testimonies of a glorious past, they are being erased to allow more projects to come into reality. Here, Cárdenas' work reflects more on the erasure of those landscapes gone into the rubbles of the city developing in the name of progress.

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