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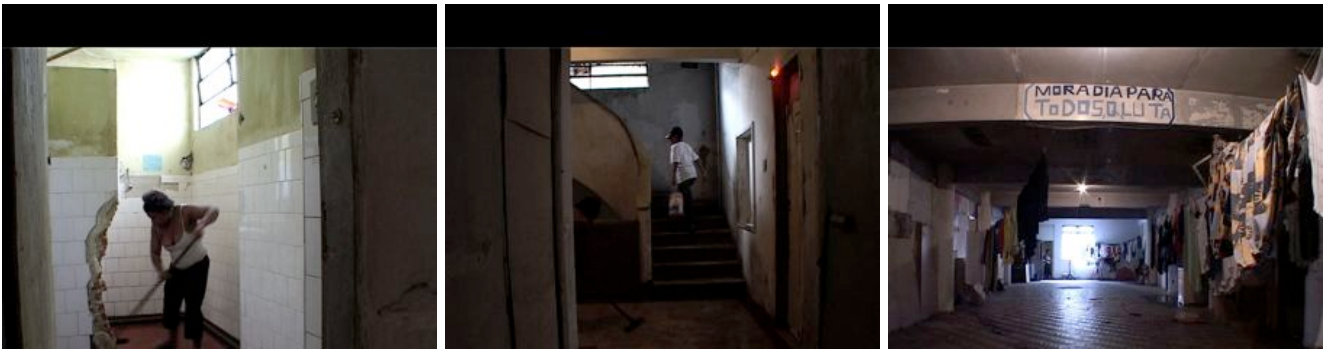
Essay: Prestes Maia

Odile Fillion

Odile Fillion is Journalist and filmmaker, curator of several exhibitions including Transarchitectures 01+02 +03 and Numéricités, she explores readings of the architecture and of architects thinking through the language of cinema, and studies relations between writing, information and communication technology and the contemporary city.

It has been 6 years now that the French artist Maurice Benayoun proposed to me to film the cities of the world for the exhibition *Cosmopolis* that he organized in China. It is in the scope of that project that I spent four days in Sao Paulo.





Our time was counted in every city. Our position as observers allowed us, without doubt, to see very fast what the inhabitants of the city did not see any more in their ordinary universe. We had got in touch with Sao Paulo, since the first day in the very center, within the mixed colored crowd, between gangways, urban highways, small street traders, bus stops, modern buildings that were already old. In the lens of my camera, where the zoom was pushed until its maximum, I tried to break the secrets hidden behind those contiguous and exposed facades. Those buildings in the city center intrigued me a lot, deserted, armor-plated, siding belted, making their access impossible. Young though, mostly born in the 50's, but prohibited, mummified. Symbols of abandonment of an once prosperous, optimistic, peaceful era. Neglected by their owners, great Brazilian societies who moved to luxurious towers at the periphery.

Some buildings seemed inhabited though. Dirty, broken glasses, covered with patchworks of wood, they were squatted; there was nothing left of their recent and proud past as office and business buildings, they were metamorphosed, degraded, but housed the least advantaged.

One afternoon, when the rain poured in torrents, we were supposed to visit one of those buildings. We read still on its principal facade weathered and tagged, the relief-letters of the former "Companha Nacional de Tecidos".



The building counted 21 floors, it articulated itself around a street corner, very close to a museum and a park. Since how long had it switched to this other life?

Of the presumed luxury of its former life as major company headquarters there was nothing left but the attached letters forgotten at the façade. They allowed situating the concrete building construction date approximately in the middle of the XXth century.

By leaving those places, the owners and former occupants had reduced the building to its carcass, emptying it of its elevators, destroying all its elements of comfort, its finishings, its soil, its partitions, its glazing, its cabling. The building had made a return to its construction phase,

concrete stairs, plateaus emptied of all separating walls, littered with trash. Judged by the caprices of urban speculations as momentarily inept to serve, it had thus been mummified, barded, but walled to avoid every appropriation.



A militant cooperative group had stormed it one night to house homeless families there. In Sao Paulo, these acts of disobedience were acceptable under certain conditions. Once the doors were forced, the first inhabitants installed, the statement of occupation made to the authorities, according to the law the owners had to reactivate the water and electricity systems.

The occupied building had become a fortress in its turn, protected against possible expulsion; its access was as difficult as the one of a bank or a luxurious gated community. Guards and guardians watched and controlled the entrances of the only crossing point. It was probably a former service entrance, dimly lit by a 40 watts bulb, where men and women crossed, loaded with their provisions and their children in their arms or on their back. The first occupants, the most audacious ones, who had participated in the storming of the building, would be the most lucky ones; they had few steps to climb on the dark stairs to join their small dwelling. They were those who accepted the newcomers as well, established communitarian rules, the rents and the charges of every family. They defined as well the lots and the space of everyone, the calendar, the obligations, the rituals of daily life.

Originally, and at every floor, offices had been probably organized a side of a central corridor, at the exit of the elevator. The dwelling units were implanted using the same typology: a central space gave access to two parallel housing areas, whose walls were cobbled together with plywood and cardboard, maybe recovered on the spot or in nearby streets. Public showers and toilets were regrouped at the stairs platform, in the place of the building's former toilets. Every floor constituted a small community with its officials in charge, its planned and shared cleaning duties.



At the common space and in front of every door of every dwelling unit, the washing machine of every family on caster wheels explained the weekly calendar as well, the laundry days of everyone. As a recurrent décor from one floor to another, the abundant and multicolored exhibition of daily laundries.

The images I filmed remind me of those already distant moments.

At first we had climbed until the 21st floor, in a half darkness, crossing those comings and goings of men, women, children, carrying their burden. At that time the last floors were still vacant, having not yet found any voluntaries for this daily climbing. In the top, from the empty space in ruin, littered with glass and pieces of walls, we discovered through the large chipped windows the brumous extensions of Sao Paulo.



At the descent, we stopped at every floor, compared their collages of plywood, their garlands of laundry, and the only suspended bulb, whose weak and flickering light enlightened the central space. It was more or less luminous according to the glazing state. At some floors, where all the windows were broken, there was total darkness. The children played under the decor of the suspended and multicolored laundry. If teenagers danced samba, small children abandoned their games to join them; parents fit and removed laundry, adults complained about the noise and the music, families opened us the doors of their small housings with a smile.

Laundry management seemed an essential preoccupation. The father of a family explained to us how life was organized on some square meters, with his three small children. Everything was clean and orderly, in the tiny kitchen-dining room as well as in the common room where bunk beds, chairs, wardrobes, television and video game consoles were assembled. A small girl showed me "her" drawer and her small clothes ironed and placed in impeccable order. His father told himself happy in these few square meters, happy to have had the chance to quit the street or the faraway favela for this micro-housing in the city center. In the staircase flooded by the rain, a woman who squeezed the soil was singing at the top. So narrow that life installed in these floors was, so needy the comfort, so painful these comings and goings, so great the crowding, the residents did not complain.

Our stay in Sao Paulo took us as well into some favelas but we did not find the same energy there neither the symbolism of this tower conquered by force, so ingeniously diverted, transformed and controlled. I will keep for a long time the memory of those children who danced samba in that rainy afternoon.



In Europe, and in France in particular, the today's modernity pretends to be synonymous for eternal youth. Our cities hate the ruin, the norms prohibit the bricolage, and the rare squats are possibly tolerated artistic phenomenon. Our city centers, that's true, are never deserted as they are in the Americas but poverty is more and more present there; more homelesses sleep on the Paris sidewalks, due to a lack of alternatives and of available "standard" social housing.

By necessity, South America finds spontaneously, through the transformation and the recycling of all its objects, a creativity and an energy, and alternative processes that are of its own. In the streets, the trucks, buses and broken-down cars of the poorest ones meddle with the armored and glazed cars of the rich; different ways of living have a place, like the presence of cartoneros who invent other urban landscapes by creating other economies.

I have not come back to Sao Paulo since that journey... What has become, five years later, this building of the "Companhia Nacional de Tecidos" with its tags and its patchwork facade which made it an icon? What have the authorities done finally for those families such precariously installed and so happy about their community though? Wouldn't there be a true model?

The more we clean, standardize, museumize or disneylandize the cities of the world, the more we make them insipid to watch as well as to live in. And what if this form of urban disobedience would reopen other perspectives?



