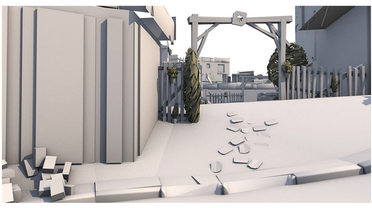
Favela

After all these ideal spaces, it is time to return to reality again. To do so, we have chosen the antipode of those spaces presented so far, their nearly absolute negation: the favela, a Portuguese word from the place where they first were named so, in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of 20th century. According to recent estimates, nearly half of all city dwellers in the developing world, about 1 billion people, are living in squatter settlements, i.e. in slums, or favelas. Slums or 'favelas' are a distinguishing characteristic of today's megacities, as a recent report concludes, and cities like Mumbai, Rio de Janeiro, Caracas, Manila or Hong Kong would be different places if slums were not part of their landscapes, it says. We have to compare scales to judge that phenomenon properly. A census of 2014 reported that more than 54% of the total world population lived in urban areas - for the first time in human history, more people live there than in the countryside, the reversal of a classical relation – and that by 2050, an overall increase of urban population by 66% is to be expected, worldwide. According to United Nations reports, more than 90% of this increase will take place in Asia and Africa. All in all, the world's urban population is expected to surpass 6 billion by the year 2045; that is, not in a distant future, or a medium-termed time range, but in historical terms right now, in the very next decades. In 2014, total urban population has been estimated to come close to 3.9 billion people. If it holds valid that an estimated 1 billion of these live in slums or 'favelas', it would mean that a quarter of the entire urban population today will live in these conditions; and that at least for one fourth of the urban population, this is the 'normal' conditio humana today – of a being that had been characterized to embody a cultural animal and, first of all, a zoon politikon, an animal that lives in city-conditions – and has to live there, in order to prosper; and not in those of recent slumming.

This re-issues the entire topic of an ideal space or, more precisely as concrete human conditions of dwelling are regarded, that of an ideal city. Are such constructs confined to the happy few, the privileged people - as for instance in the new ideal cities which are built as "smart" cities, i.e. technologically perfected spaces with full internet devices etc., an urban agriculture as a new form of reconciling the old dichotomy between nature and culture, and free plus healthy individuals expecting an old age? What about the rest of a worldwide urban population for whom the second nature has not become culture, but culture in the shape of an overcrowded civilization existing in marginal conditions? Does it make sense to speak of "ideal spaces" any longer, in the context of such conditions?

The topos of the favela has been addressed in Janice Perlman's The Myth of Marginality, a first in-depth account of life in the favelas three decades ago, and violence, drugs and arms became outstanding problems during that period, next to the others already existing: poverty, lack of infrastructure, sanitary conditions and crowding.

What is needed, so an investigator operating with favelas (J. M. Jáurequi), would be other spaces than those which are still predominant, namely spaces designed in a new way: as contemporary piazzas, surrounded by places of rendering, trade, manufacture, services and cultural events, functioning as "potential attractors on the border between formal and informal", linked by public transportation and "including nature fragments capable of rebalancing the green mass-built mass relation." The goal is to establish "urban scale shaded Agoras" to allow for producers and expositions of various kind, even for some kind of popular university, he says, "by forming innovation and production centers based on the characteristics of each social group."



What he mentions we tried to figure out, in the design of our favela world. And what he mentions refers to our general theme of an 'ideal' space. Since grossly speaking (and not meant in a cynical way), what he proposes refers to an old idea existing before all those spaces we show: It is the idea of the polis, with the agora, the "market place" in its wider sense as its center. There, opposed to an exactly predefined "ideal" spatiality pre-given for those to live in, a right balance between the formal and the informal was in place (at least according to our ideal of a polis), between an order pre-given and a 'spontaneous' order emerging due to the real needs of real life processes. What does this mean? Seen in this respect (and this, too, is not meant cynical), having a glance at this old mythic ideal of a polis, it does not need a perfect predesigned space, as "ideal" place to live; instead, such a space may develop, driven by the needs and desires of those who actually inhabit it. Seen in such a respect - and only in a such one - what we tried to present as the last world in our reign of worlds presented so far is a novelty, a juxtaposition to the classical utopia: the classical utopia was designed by a (hopefully) benevolent creator, was posed on the tabula rasa, the empty space as an abstraction of how things ought to be. What Jáurequi proposes and what the curator of Biennale 2016, Alejandro Aravena really tried to make was to provide a space where the inhabitants, translated into the concrete, those human beings actually living there are deciding how it shall look like.

Or, translated into the terms of the symbolic: We don't have to start with the worst case imaginable to start with, at the first glance, namely with a slum, the apex of human deterioration as regards actual living conditions. In our presentation of worlds, we have chosen the slum as a stylistic figure as well, a symbol of a dystopian space full of "bad places". Next to our other intention: namely to show, at the end of all spaces presented, one which really exists, and which is the epitome of an endangered human condition. The human being, although it is a zoon politikon and a cultural animal (to refer to earlier sayings about being genuinely 'human'), has to live in such circumstances; 1 billion living in slums is not just a fact, it is a sign for a general human condition to be expected for a large fraction of a worldwide population.

To draw a very general, rough sketch: due to the side effects they generated in the course of their unfolding, it were the myths of growth, progress and functionality, addressed in the foregoing, which led to such circumstances – in the final, when combined with capitalist circumstances (to abbreviate different historical processes). It were certain myths of order which generated their very opposite, in terms of a view of the world, and of actual relations. These myths stand for (a), the typically modern belief that a relevant world, i.e. the total of 'made' spaces where humans have to live, can be made: can be constructed, at least in its relevant parts; and (b), that such a world can be designed as a system of networks of functionalities, i.e. as a system which is essentially technical. It is a myth that became applied full-scaled to city space for the first time in the Renaissance, as we have seen. In other words, it is one which has a long-reaching mental anchorage in our 'cultural' memory, based on the belief that the world can be dominated, and that this is possible in literal technical terms. Or, as the anthropologist Levi-Strauss formulated it, it is equivalent to a magic ruse to ban the Being: through transforming it into a set of functions, a system of control.
All this has to be doubted in the face of such developments.

But: We can see this world presented here in its positive terms as well, despite its exaggeration as a stylistic means. What if we would be enabled to erect utopia, the eu-topos or "good place" by our own, without the dictatorship of predefined and pre-given orders? What would be if we really could decide by our own which places we want to live in – not as an internet escapism, but as a real physical space? What would be if we, in trying so, refrained from the myth of a second paradise? By not trying to achieve some final end state but one that is allowed to evolve, that remains flexible and vivid? Wouldn't this be a great idea?

Of course, this might sound naïve, and most probably it is. But, as Oscar Wilde said, already in a 19th century full of metropolises and their slums: A map without utopias is not worth to be drawn. Or, expressed in the words of a novelist from the 20th century, an "age of extremes", as Erich Fried had it: Someone who wants the world to remain as it is does not want it to remain.