

# MARJETICA POTRČ: URBAN NEGOTIATION

ANA MARÍA TORRES

Feel my body  
architect  
so your plans  
will not be so rigid  
listen to the sound  
of my voice  
so you will know  
what volume is  
my soul is made  
of no substance  
your space might  
be the same  
I am made  
for birth  
and you?

JOHN HEJDUK, *Soundings*<sup>1</sup>

Old tradition insists that the foundation of any settlement was accompanied by rituals, so what was "altered" from nature could be restored to her as a metaphor. Any settlement was considered a *polis*, city, if counted with the presence of a public space, a temple and a market. Since Plato cities like Athens, which means "born of the earth," and Alexandria have been offered as examples of both urban virtue and urban decay. Aristophanes, in *The Birds* for example, ridiculed the pretensions of urban planners and legislators as the ironic dialogue between Epops and Euelpides reflects

Epops: And are you looking for a greater city than Athens?  
Euelpides: No, not a greater, but one more pleasant to live in.

(414 B.C.E)

The idea that urban design should be controlled and orchestrated first emerged in Hellenistic cities as a precedent to Imperial Rome. This means that, in this period, the cities that were created organically were found untidy and congested. For the past five thousand years criticisms have been clamorous — philosophers, sociologists, traffic experts, and urban planners have all written at length about the city and its problems. Criticism is not what the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč uses when she presents examples of actual unplanned settlements. On the contrary, the artist reads what the city reveals on its fringes, keeping in mind that the pride of citizens in their homes does not follow any rational criteria and that this display is not recognized by the traditional urban structures. By bringing into galleries and museums the reconstruction of "core units" — basic structures and facilities onto which a home can be built — Potrč offers an aesthetic of extremely low budget architecture which, with its use of local materials and "happy colors," is sometimes, paradoxically, more progressive than the "self-style urban type."<sup>2</sup> The irregular patterns of unplanned settlements bring us back to the pre-Hellenistic cities in which everyone was theoretically equally and everyone's public life was of more account than his or her personal fortune. After the Hellenistic period governments adopted building codes and enforced regulations, what we might call "perceivable order which in turn relies on the ability to see the city as a ceremonial symbol."<sup>3</sup>

"It was urban planning that interested me and turned out to be my passion. I didn't like the idea of sitting in an architect's office and drawing plans, por-

<sup>1</sup> John Hejduk. *Such Places as Memory. Poems 1953-1996. Soundings eyes from Michelangelo's Madonna*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998. p. 82-83.

<sup>2</sup> Any Merrifield. *Metromarxism. A Marxist Tale of the City*. Routledge, New York, 2002. p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Zeynep Celik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll. *Streets*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1994. p. 15.



ing over the papers and thinking about a city as a body that you can control, save and operate, like surgeons do," says Marjetica Potrč in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist while explaining why fifteen years ago she turned from architecture to art and started sculpting. Expressing the result of this switch the artist says, "Thinking there might be something I could do on my own, in fact, I have been continuing the pursuit of the impossibility of urban planning ever since." In the late 1980s Potrč began showing to the public collected information — examples of architectural and urban interventions. Included were gated communities, shantytowns, containers in Belfast and wild animals living in the city, *Animal Sightings*, 2000, trying to adapt to urban life. In the last case, Potrč presents her observation of the wild animals, "Like immigrants they just keep coming," through series of digital prints, pointing out the idea of the constant negotiation of physical borders. One image might show a bear falling from a power pole in a cloud of smoke, presumably after being electrocuted, another a coyote in an elevator.

In her focus on thinkers and planners who have gone to the edges of the disciplines of urban planning and architecture — all to better understand these disciplines' alternative potentials — Potrč has also looked to the personal initiatives of architects like Samuel Mockbee and Bunker Roy. Potrč's analysis of the spontaneous city rediscovers the existence of the urban void as explored not only by architects but also by the Dada and Situationist artistic movements. Potrč, as did the Dadaists and Situationists, brings us back to the city as moral entity, like Athens of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., where community was more important than setting. That notion changed with the Hellenistic era in which urbanism was not the faith of public life but the art of public living.<sup>4</sup> The artists of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde recognized the aesthetic value of unplanned spaces and the importance of negotiation leading to the possibility of having deeply different forms of experience in the same time and place — a structured urban city of mutual discussion.

Bored with art, and bored in the city, the Dada movement began a series, on April 14<sup>th</sup> of 1921 in Paris, of urban excursions to the "banal places" of the city with a guide for the "tour" written, most likely, by Tristan Tzara. This became one of the most important of the Dada movement's interventions in the city. The participants wanted to unmask the absurd situation of the bour-

geois city by assigning aesthetic value to a space rather than to an object. They urged artists to develop a non-traditional approach to intervening in public spaces, by not leaving any physical trace of their presence. These explorations continued with the Situationists. The understanding was that "all human forms are in a constant state of transformation," as Asger Jorn wrote in the mid 1950s in the Situationist publication *Image and Form* in talking about the future of architecture. The Situationists, like the Dada movement, reacted against the functionalism of the modernism in the bourgeois city. They defended the urban mix and wanted to get beyond the rational city by attempting to reassert imagination in urban culture. That idea is visible in how Potrč explains her urban experiences, "I love to return to unpredictable cities. Thus I never tire of Moscow, which must be the most uncontrollable and unfathomable of European cities. It is a far cry from comfortable or harmonious. Its fascinating, preposterous medley of architectural styles is like a labyrinth in which it is hard to find one's way." She continues, "Anything can happen to me there. This unintelligible, precarious character of the city is what quickens my pulse. Although dysfunctional, to my eyes, Moscow is beautiful." The Situationists' concept of "unitary urbanism" was a critique of the existing urbanism. As Andy Merrifield remarks, "It would battle against planners," and continues, "it would work against market-driven cities, against cities where spaces became 'abstract' commodities, monopolized by the highest bidder. The unitary city would be disruptive and playful, reuniting physical and social separations."<sup>5</sup>

An analogous attitude can be found in the contemporary art workshop called *Stalker*, where investigations of the city are done through experiences of *transurbance* — the practice of the path-journey as an evocative mode of expression and an instrument of knowledge of the ongoing transformations in the metropolitan territory<sup>6</sup> — in open spaces and in interaction with the inhabitants. Francesco Careri, one of the founders of *Stalker* states, "the city is a living, empathic organism with its own unconscious, with spaces that elude the project of modernism and live and transform themselves independently of the will of the urbanists."

We all know, one way or another, a lot about the urban dialectic, about how it shapes not only the function and form but also the understanding of the

<sup>4</sup> Zeynep Celik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll. *Streets*. p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Merrifield. *Metromarxism. A Marxist Tale of the City*. p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Careri. *Walkscapes*. Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2002. p. 179.



city. It is dialectic that recognizes the shantytowns as urban shadows and promises that dazzling stores and enticing urban services can provide the dream of freedom and liberty. This dialect holds a contradictory duality of bad and good as a collective process of circumstances transmitted from the past and through the analysis of individuals, like Marjetica Potrč. Everyone is hypnotized by production and convenience. Presented with the choice between glamour and a garbage disposal unit Potrč, like Dada, opted for garbage disposal units. On one side of this dialectic is Potrč with comments like, "Non-governmental organizations are praised today. So should be shantytowns. They are pointing to our dreams. You give up your dream, you die." These points are emphasized by Walter Benjamin's discussion about another type of untamed urban space, "The arcades and interiors are residues of a dream world. The utilization of dream elements in waking is a textbook example of dialectical thought. Hence dialectical thought is the organ of historical awakening." Benjamin brings the conclusion of the activity to the fore — the discussion is about something much more important than idle hopes for a better future and nicer living conditions. At stake are individuals' entire relationship to their selves and their culture.

Of course there is another side to this dialectic. The transformation from inside out that penetrates the planned city creates new voids, normally off the



Rural Studio: Butterfly House, 2002

map and defined in many occasions as the non-city, such as shantytowns and other spontaneous settlements. These new voids are treated by urban planners as areas to re-qualify, to chop up into functional units, to bulldoze into quarters.

Marjetica Potrč's work documents these spaces and the tensions they engender. In doing so she encounters self-sustainable solutions that empower individuals and then society as a whole. Her work also reflects the inventiveness and desires of the individual involved in solving problems of housing, water and energy in the urban city. The artist explains "The emphasis on self-reliance and individual empowerment that we find in Rural Studio's projects — as well as in other communities, such as Barefoot College in India — points to a new sort of balance of power in the contemporary global society. I am referring here less to deregulation per se than to the way individuals (today more than ever) can make significant contributions to the society even while improving their own living conditions."

Rural Studio, another of Potrč's case studies, is a program created by the architect Samuel Mockbee for architectural students at Auburn University. Convinced "that architecture should express the democracy of America" Samuel Mockbee — a recipient of the MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 2000 — founded, in 1992, Auburn University's Rural Studio in Hale County, Alabama, one of the poorest counties in the United States. The houses are built with very limited budgets and unusual materials, tailored to the particular client and climate, and respond with inventive designs to answer one of the most significant questions posed to the profession: how to design low income housing? Rural Studio's groundbreaking designs are for families in Greensboro, Alabama that have been living in "substandard homes," which means battered trailers and plank houses. Each year Mockbee and a group of his undergraduate students traveled to the University's Rural Studio in Greensboro to design and build. The spirit of the program is exemplified in the first completed building, the Bryant House, finished in 1994 for a cost of \$15,000. The Bryant House named "Hay Bale House" after the eighty-pound hay bales used for the substructure of the walls distinguishes the studio's approach from that of other low income housing programs and reflects Mockbee's statement, "The goal is not to have a warm, dry house, but to have a warm, dry house with a spirit to it."

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley. *Rural Studio. Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency*. Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2002. p. 1-13.





Leidsche Rijn House, 2003

An aspect of the importance of the work done in Rural Studio, recaptured and shared by Potrč, is the way Samuel Mockbee presented architecture to his students as a discipline that evolves in harmony with the conditions of its place and is rooted in the service of a community independent of economic status. He believed that architecture can create a sense of passion, identity and belonging for excluded members of society. As Potrč, herself, stated above in speaking about Rural Studio, she sees importance in the fact that individual initiative benefits both the individual and the community, and she adds emphasis, "I am passionate about this." Incorporating Rural Studio as one of her case studies the artist is making a contribution to the public awareness of its work and at the same time helps the continuation of the program. Mockbee died of Leukemia in December of 2001.

Each of Potrč's case studies, focusing on humans' creativity as manifested in their projects, points to the need of individual identity in the face of anonymous governmental solutions. The creativity expressed in the informal city is nurtured outside of the mainstream social and economic environment; in some cases it is the product of individuals' necessity. This concept is evident in her case study of Leidsche Rijn in the Netherlands, an example of how a planned urban project accommodates the wishes of their habitants allowing

for self-designed houses or accepting gypsy caravans. "Utrecht is proud of the city planning they have developed, which they call 'urbanism of negotiation.' In fact they consciously de-regulate traditional establishment by planning areas where travelers settle" explains Potrč, "In this way, they both accept the limits of what city planners can do and they acknowledge the coexistence of travelers who live in Leidsche Rijn too." Leidsche Rijn is constructed in accordance with the personal preferences of the inhabitants based on their interests in environmental protection, rainwater harvesting or energy management. It exists in one of the world's most highly regulated communities, the Dutch society.

Barefoot College in Tilonia, founded by Bunker Roy in 1972, shares some of the same environmental principles as Leidsche Rijn. Potrč introduced this project to New York City through her project *Barefoot College: A House Building material, energy infrastructure* in 2002 at the Max Protetch Gallery, New York City. The community itself in Tilonia generates its own energy by combining local knowledge with high technology. It also utilizes inventive concepts of education that emphasize learning from mutual interaction. As its name "Barefoot College," given by its director and founder, indicates, the process is hands-on. An education is provided for individuals that would never have had the opportunity for formal elementary school education. "In Barefoot, the only limit is your imagination, ideas can grow here," states Bhanwar Gopal, a Barefoot communicator. Since its creation the college has been working on producing solar units for the electrification of remote villages, water harvesting to provide safe drinking water, planting restoration, revitalizing traditional forms of communication including puppetry and street theater and educating women, to become solar engineers for example, and children through running night schools in villages. Barefoot emphasizes and nurtures individual self-reliance for the development of the community and insists on village level planning. Potrč relates with Barefoot's ideas with passion and conviction because these kind of ideas lead to individual independence.

One of the first occasions that Potrč called attention to programs that promote self-sufficiency was in 1997 at the Landesmuseum in Münster, with her first *The Core Unit* installation based on suburban housing programs in South America, where some local governments train the jobless in skills that promote self-sufficiency. Another installation that pointed to urban self-sufficiency was her representation of a core-unit program in Kagiso suburb in Johannesburg, South Africa where the "city provides a simple structure: a roof on stilts and connections to the sewage and water system." *Kagiso: Skeleton House* was



presented in 2001 at the Guggenheim Museum, New York City. From the Guggenheim Potrč received the Hugo Boss Prize, that year. Both of the above examples work as a promotion of practical alternatives adopted by the traditional structure that recognize the need for individuality and self-sustenance. Potrč's projects can be viewed from different vantage points. They are in accordance with Gabriel García Márquez's gypsy's assertion in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "'Things have a life of their own,' the gypsy proclaimed, with a harsh accent. 'It's simply a matter of waking up their souls.'"

Prior to working on the case studies and after creating the two installations titled *Two Faces of Lost Expectations* and *Two Faces of Utopia*, Potrč started to build in 1993 *Theatrum mundi*. These human scale double-sided walls were conceived as a result of the political changes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The walls become storytellers. They were, "cutouts from the facades of randomly chosen buildings in the cities where I exhibited. On two occasions, I built several walls in a row: Cities were added one to another, like the never-ending cities of the contemporary metropolis." We should keep in mind that town planning is never innocent of political or social ends. The struggle for a self-ruled city began in the twelfth century, following the idea that had existed in the classical Greek city and had disappeared with the medieval city. This concept of self-ruling appears in almost all the cases that Potrč exposes. The quintessential example is Hong Kong and its illegal facades, "residents build on the outside of high rises to enlarge their living areas. Illegal facades are practically everywhere; you just have to look up. In some cases, spontaneous and anarchic additions obscure the entire original facade. They are initiated by individuals — needless to say, the constructions are not approved by authorities, a detail which I find indicative of third world urban life."

Another case, presented by the artist in 1999 at Worcester Art Museum, is the 24-hour ordinance in a certain area of Turkey that allows whatever has been built in a twenty-four hour period, and has a roof, to stay. The artist indicates that she finds some humor in the fact that people live in permanently unfinished buildings to avoid paying taxes.

Potrč attempts to bring to our attention a new system of values that exists in the informal city, unseen and unknown to the traditional urban city.

However, if it is recognized by the established city the unplanned city is seen and treated as the site of corruption — a world where everything becomes vicious and dangerous. The reality is that from the time of antiquity the irregular patterns of the streets have been created through a long process of architectural arbitrations and piecemeal changes. As Italo Calvino writes in *Invisible Cities*, "cities believe themselves to be the work either of the mind or of chance, but neither the first nor the second suffices to maintain their walls."<sup>8</sup> Recognizing these new systems, we allow ourselves to pose the following questions: Are the traditional methods of urban planning sufficient to respond to individual needs, or do we need to conceive of new ways of responding to urban development? Can we understand the new system of values in the new urban settlements?

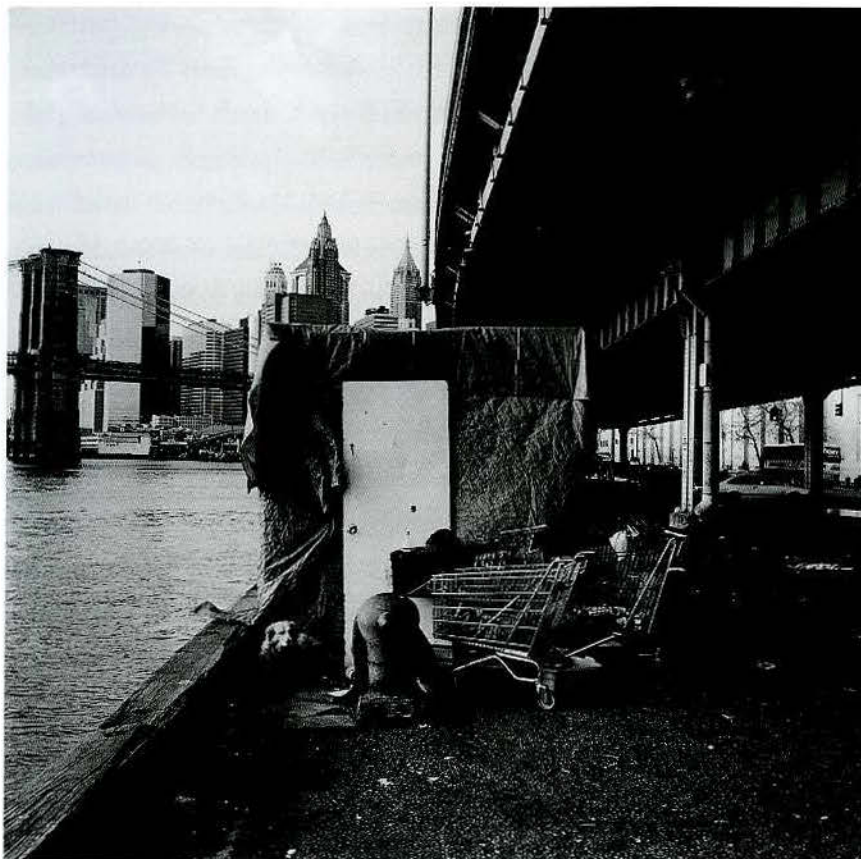
Indeed some of the examples that Potrč presents show how when individual needs meet particular urban developments, such as the lack of available power in South African shantytowns, technology can change, even become less technological, in response. Potrč uses a "clockwork mobile telephone" as an example. She describes how the product has one part that is the mobile telephone and the other that is a clockwork telephone charger. When the two parts are connected and the handle is wound on the charger for thirty seconds, one can talk for up to six minutes. She points out how in "the informal" city everyone uses mobile telephones.

Potrč's interest in temporary constructions, living structures, also calls attention to the use of local materials in different countries. These are the materials the artist uses in her installations. This reconfirms what Buckminster Fuller mentioned in *Lightful Houses*, "the art of house building was created long before the art of transportation, and the methods devised for building with local materials and help have persisted way into this era of transportation."<sup>9</sup> As she observes, they are often the surplus of a very advanced consumerism and they make it possible to understand economies generated by those settlements. They show us how a marginalized economy can surround the official economy of a planned city and threaten the city with its autonomy. The "barriadas" in Lima are one example; formed 20 years ago as temporary shelters they are now established houses of varying affluence with a great variety of styles. "In the future, the nexus of the world will be the city-state and not the nation-state," says the artist.

<sup>8</sup> Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*. p. 50.

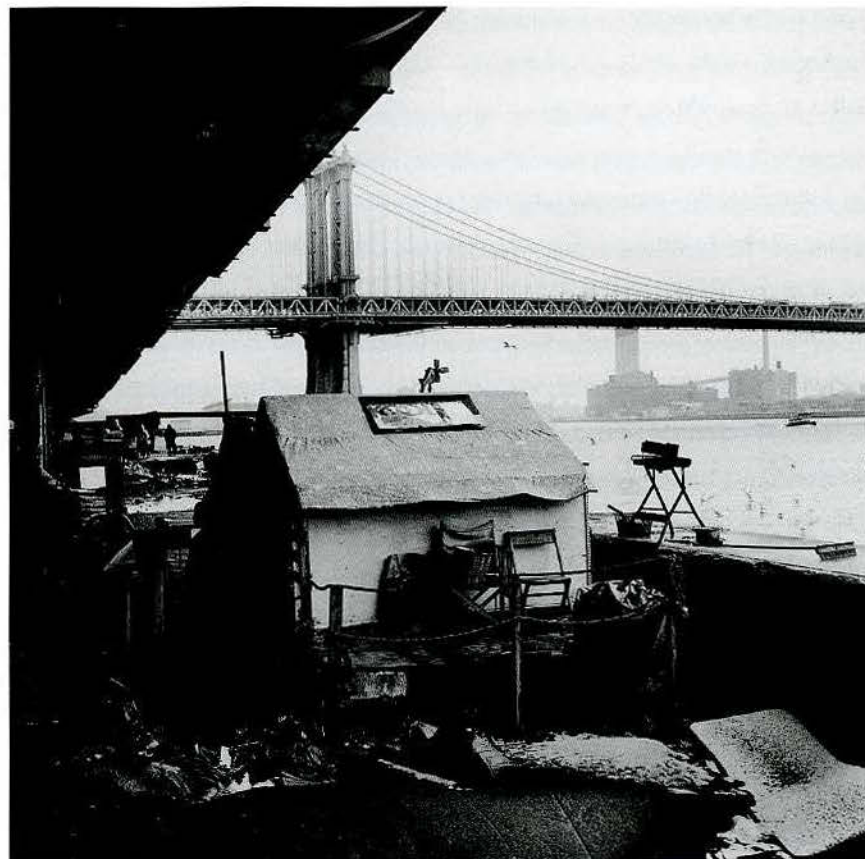
<sup>9</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller. *Lightful Houses*. Joachim Krausse/Claude Lichtenstein. *Your Private Sky*. R. Buckminster Fuller. *Discourse*. Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich. 2001. p. 64.





Casa de Bo con perro y chica / Bo's house with dog, girl, East River, NYC  
Fotografía / Photo: Margaret Morton © 1991

The artist presents *East Wahdat: Upgrading Program* as an example of a change in aptitude by the officials of Amman where the population lives in unregulated settlements. She explored how city authorities provided road access, electricity and the core unit, which included water and a sewage system. By making evident the possibility of less traditional approaches Potrč's work can open up new way of thought in the traditional public sector that usually has the tendency to approach these self-organizing structures with the idea of their needing upgrading, cleaning-up. Unfortunately by cleaning them up the concerns of the individuals inhabiting them are removed solely through the destruction of the spontaneous settlements. One example, in New York City, was the demolition in 1992 of a shantytown of about 30 shacks, of varying levels of sophistication, created mainly by Latin immigrants under the Manhattan Bridge. As Margaret Morton who has been photographing homeless dwellings in New York since 1989 states in her book *Fragile Dwelling*, "These improvised habitats ... bear witness to the profound human need to create a sense of place, no matter how extreme one's circumstances." The immigrants were relocated to social



Segunda casa de Mac / Mac's second house, East River, NYC  
Fotografía / Photo: Margaret Morton © 1993

housing in the outskirts of the city. The independence and resourcefulness of the individual disappears, the urban friction fades away. The only way that this can be recuperated is through the flexibility of the infrastructure to accept individuality and diversity that opposes both the high technology utopia and the global city. Potrč, again like Dada, has rediscovered the existence of the informal city, which is constantly offering unexpected relations, aesthetic values. The artist takes the discourse further in emphasizing the importance of self-reliance and self-sustaining technologies that convert the individual into a participant in shaping urban environments. These ethical concerns are reflected in the comment of Buckminster Fuller, "We are approaching a time when the greatest sin will be falsehood which is identical with inefficiency, which is also identical with selfishness or evasion of a truth for personal gain."<sup>10</sup> The work of Marjetica Potrč, like that of Samuel Mockbee, directs attention to the poorest parts of society, making evident that by using creativity and the significant powers of invention inherent to being human we can create richly designed architecture with minimum means.

<sup>10</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller. *Lightful Houses*. p. 69.

The small incident, the twisted street, the rounded corner, the little planted oasis un-expectedly appearing can then be recognized as having its own dignity, more powerful than imposed places and boulevards. This opinion, though, wasn't shared by one of the fathers of the modern movement the architect Le Corbusier to whom streets symbolized disorder and disharmony. Le Corbusier's battle cry was, "You must kill the street!" Potrč's affinities are, again, differently aligned. The artist draws attention not just to the areas of the city marginalized by the poverty of their inhabitants. She also identifies those ignored for their lack of purpose, such as alleys that are neither entirely public nor private. She speaks of them as describing peripheries of territories that act in some ways like an interface. Questions are raised about who takes responsibility for an alley — about to whom it belongs. She brings a similar eye to places in the city that are impossible — even nonexistent — and has made drawings about a conceptual game, a puzzle, utilizing the spaces of the city. Potrč describes, "There are seven bridges in the city of Königsberg. While strolling through the city, you cross each of the bridges only once. Is this possible? This puzzle, a pleasurable

diversion for the citizens, was proved to be impossible to solve by the mathematician Leonard Euler in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the seven bridges of Königsberg, that made the game interesting, are gone (don't exist any more). Also, the rules of the game have changed. [Today,] It is no more based on logic."

The importance of Marjetica Potrč's case studies is how they reflect the series of negotiations necessary to survive in the urban city and make obvious their disengagement from the traditional urban structure by their location in places of uncontrollable diversity. They also remind us that we are not using our knowledge or daring to create architecture of our own. And Fuller announced what had to change, "Until people dare to stand on their own and have the courage of their own convictions, and express these convictions to the world, they will never acquire character."<sup>11</sup> Potrč shares with Fuller his idea that, "A home, like a person, must be as completely as possible independent and self supporting, have its own character, dignity, and beauty or harmony."

<sup>11</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller. *Lightful Houses*. p. 73.

**Ana María Torres** is a doctor of architecture, who practices in the United States and Spain. In 2000 she founded the architectural firm At Architects in New York. Previously she was a principal at Balmori Associates, Inc., New Haven, CT. She taught architecture at the School of architecture in Madrid. She is the author of an upcoming book, *Carme Pinos: An Architecture of overlay*, and has written a monograph on Isamu Noguchi's public spaces, *Isamu Noguchi: A Study of Space*, both published by The Monacelli Press. She is also the architecture editor for *NY Arts Magazine*.