

# Fictional construction of the territory

Interview with Marcos Castaings and Diego Pérez

Martín Delgado, Esteban Varela and Juliana Espósito

## Abstract

Two founders of *Fábrica de Paisaje*, Marcos Castaings and Diego Pérez, describe their vision of landscape and territorial ordinance in this interview. For them, landscape is the connective tissue of the territory and fiction is a way of understanding reality and operating in it. A new landscape only exists if a story gives meaning to it, if a narrative construction is capable of inducing reactions and meta-stories.

*Fábrica de Paisaje* proposes an alternative methodology, based on the displacing of the work objective from the construction of concrete products to the generation of unfinished fictions that build projects along time.

The interview revises the foundations of some projects of *Fábrica de Paisaje*, such as Parque Artigas (Las Piedras) and Costa de Oro (Canelones). Those who are interviewed reflect on the image and give a critical view of traditional participation methodologies.

Uruguayan architects Castaings and Pérez founded the collective architecture studio "Fábrica de Paisaje" ("Landscape Factory"). For them, landscape is the connective tissue of the territory. But a new landscape exists only if a story makes sense of it, if a narrative construction is capable of inducing reactions and meta-stories. For "Fábrica de Paisaje", fiction is a way of understanding reality and functioning in it.

**Martín Delgado:** You work with an alternative<sup>(1)</sup> methodology to the traditional protocol of action on the territory. What relationship could be suggested between a crisis scenario and this proposal and what advantages do you find in this variation?

Marcos Castaings: Traditional methodologies to work on the territory, town planning and ordinance, have a lot to do with very complex processes of situation diagnoses, research and assessment, mainly top-down. These methodologies become too heavy and rigid to work in territories that have little stability and economic power, in territories which are not rich. The alternative methodology proposed by us is composed of various subjects, but it is, fundamentally, the displacement of the work objective from the construction of concrete products towards the generation of unfinished fictions, stories, very pregnant arguments which intend to construct projects in the long term.

We aim at generating a hypothesis, a fiction of something that is happening or is about to happen, then we invite many actors to work on it. As long as this fiction is successful, the producers

multiply since the actors appropriate it and the initial creator is lost. In this sense, the unfinished argument and fiction begin to be productive, especially in relation to the territories that are in crisis or have certain limitations.

**Esteban Varela:** You mention certain actors and propose ways of putting them in action so as to materialise an idea or a project. Can you give an example where this technique is shown?

Diego Pérez: A good example is Parque Artigas<sup>(1)</sup> of the city of Las Piedras;<sup>(2)</sup> the project is the result of a competition in which we won the first prize. This park is located on the site where the first independentist<sup>(3)</sup> battle of certain importance in Rio de la Plata took place, which was won by the revolutionaries. Our generating story was based on a twofold argument: the landscape reconstruction of what that battle was and the collective construction of a park using the landscape rhythms.

We proposed a very *sui generis* project for a park, consisting of a very heterogeneous agenda of interventions. In order for it to be feasible, we could not do something that people could not make their own, mainly in the case of a park with a really important historical background, located in a very complex suburban context.

The question was, then, how to transform an existing park with the participation of the people, so that the social control itself and the empathy with the original story would look after it and carry it out. The most explanatory intervention of the Project was the one that we called: "The thousand trees of Artigas". It was an operation of strong symbolic significance.

The objective was to project, at city scale, the perception of the change generated by the remodelling work of the park. The operation consisted in recreating allegorically, by means of one thousand trees that would be planted in the city of Las Piedras, the thousand men and women that formed Artigas' army.<sup>(4)</sup>

The original idea of this proposal came from the slogan: "a tree for every child". Each child of the last primary course in the city of Las Piedras would be allocated an Ibirapitá<sup>(5)</sup> to plant and then look after for a year, an obligation that would be passed on to a student of the following class at the end of the year. Finally, the management of this initiative was channelled through public primary and secondary schools of the city, choosing a strategy focused on more community activities that would establish group responsibilities.

*Castaigns:* We must not confuse these mechanics of work with the typical participative methodology. In our proposals, people participate, but on the basis of an initial fiction that is, in this case, the idea that the trees represent a bigger fiction: the Artiguist army. Through this symbolism, a different picture of the city can be built. Participation is guided, it is managed on the argument of a basis that responds to certain poetry of the landscape and which has a great generating capacity.

When each basis actor participates only by approaching restlessness, as it usually happens in traditional mechanics, a twofold problem emerges: these queries are linked to very primary needs and little territorially productive; at the same time, the specificity of the professional working in architecture, urbanism or territory is

wasted, turning him into an articulator of basic needs. In our alternative, the actor participates in the fictional and poetic construction of his territory, as he generates links of trust with the technicians involved, which allow him to make his needs more freely explicit.

**Juliana Espósito:** So, this alternative methodology to the traditional protocol is also an alternative to the usual theories and mechanics of participation.

*Castaigns:* This methodology involves a participation based on a previous story. We do not understand participative mechanics as the organization of instances where everybody says what he wants or needs from a territory, then to generate a project for that territory. We understand that there is an initial, fundamental instance, owned by the architect of town planner. After this instance, the process of mediation comes with the wishes or needs of the people. The planner and the technical team do not only provide their knowledge of the discipline but also an organizational, fictional argument, on which to work the ideas.

*Pérez:* Here underlies something very important, the adjectivation of the territory. Traditionally the intention was to solve problems that nobody knew well until a deep diagnosis was done, and then they were abstracted and resolved without fundamental ideas. I think that people can appropriate things when they know what they really are and how to call them. Thus, there is a much stronger participation. People become part of a story.

*Castaigns:* The whole of this Project is a product of a technical analysis, but it

also brings together elements derived from a poetic proposal. There is a poetry of the territories and of the landscapes that, in a certain way, constructs the basic argument for the participation.

*Pérez:* The poetic proposal also emerges from the landscape, from the people, from the story and, in many cases, from the geography. These are details of the "common good" that are present in the place. The place is something more complex than what is merely physical.

**Delgado:** besides working with the actors or base users, do you have experiences with institutions?

*Castaigns:* Yes, the best example is the competition of Urbanistic Ideas for the Costa de Oro<sup>(6)</sup> that we won in 2007, with its subsequent developments.

The basic fiction was that the Costa de Oro could return to being a forest, a condition that prompted the development of the area and that, at the moment, is in decay. This forest condition is still present in the collective imagery, as well as the emptiness condition, of little explored space. We constructed a story that reinforced these two fictions, the forest and the emptiness. We designed a number of operations that could be combined so that this could happen, including the role of the government in all its instances of local decision. We also involved institutions linked to public education and, in particular, private enterprises because this fiction opens new investment opportunities as it allows certain freedoms.

Later, when we developed the Urban Development Guidelines for the

area, together with architect Diego Capandeguy, many of these questions were potentiated. For instance, new territorial approaches were allowed provided the woodland mass was maintained and new uses, provided the coastal clearings were maintained.

*Pérez:* Many of the management strategies incorporated into the norms and expressed by means of a guideline, were marked by an idea that had its starting point in the collective imagery, that is why, indirectly, the participative element was present from the beginning.

*Castaings:* These fictions are possible when they are underlying in the territories, in their history, their geography, their culture. Because of this, they are territorially productive and easily encroached. Caricaturizing, the fiction of Costa de Oro as a desert would not have worked.

*Varela:* Thus understood, not based on big diagnosis nor on a big investment of time and energy to generate urban supplies that feed the project, fiction functions like a fast-forward tool. It is an agile tool that can become more complex as processes progress, as it is happening with the Plan of the Costa de Oro. That is, the project can also nourish itself from the traditional tools as it progresses.

*Pérez:* That is right. There is the time factor. If I am working for five years on an urban or territorial project that includes a “complete” analysis of all the aspects and complexities at play, the political times and the economic cycles will go out of hand. In this sense, the frequent relationship with relatively short periods of crisis and good

economic cycles leave their teaching, as well as contemporary paradigms, which are generally very slippery. We must generalize and use more agile tools in a more direct way and generate more visible products.

*Castaings:* In general, it is difficult for a regulating or planning process to become a common denominator of many people.

**Delgado: The Territorial Ordinance Plan<sup>(7)</sup> (Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial, POT) of Montevideo has no approval from the people.**

*Castaings:* Perhaps the clearest way of exemplifying this is to relate it to kitsch.<sup>(8)</sup> Paraphrasing Kundera,<sup>(9)</sup> the paradigmatic image of kitsch would be something like a child running on a green lawn to his grandfather’s arms. Who can say that this is not a beautiful image? It is so beautiful that it becomes kitsch. Kitsch would be, then, the image that produces the major agreement in its value or meaning.

As diagnoses are simplified, or on purpose, like data landscapes, reflection can be focussed on the construction of a determined fiction. If we manage to make people feel touched by it, there is a greater possibility that it will embrace these projects. This mechanism ensures the success of some work in the territory. The challenge seems to move through this method close to kitsch, without using the aesthetics of kitsch, so that the effect on the people may be equally pertinent.

**Varela: Is the Fábrica de Paisaje kitsch?**

*Castaings:* In some way. At least in its search for fictions that may become common denominators of the territories.

They have called us postmodernists, or excessively ironic, but not kitsch. But there is that risk if we refer to meanings and not only images.

**Delgado: You are far from being kitsch!**

*Pérez:* Of course, to think that way is being reductionist. The frame is far more complex. We look for and use what is socially accepted, what can become an instrument for the project. We work with the energy of people, the latent social energy.

*Castaings:* We often operate on a limit near kitsch, even on the limit of irony. With fine metaphors, not for their elaboration, but in the sense that for some people they may seem suggestive and for others, aggressive. For us it is liberating not to be always concerned with being serious, circumspect. The joy of discipline excites us a lot more.

**Espósito: Is there any other relevant tool in your work?**

*Castaings:* Distance. On the one hand, it has to do with the way in which you construct a story, a suggestive argument for the different actors that in the same proposal, allows some people to see the environmental dimension and others, the identity of the place and yet others, the historical or landscape resonances. At the same time, this distance committed to a wide territory, can be compatible with a more distant academic vision.

**Delgado: The images that you propose tend to be very idyllic or very clear. When you take pictures of the projects you have built, do you try to obtain the same reference image that you used for the project?**

*Pérez: In the images we look for a certain ambiguity that allows everyone to visualize or interpret the project according to his wishes. Ultimately, these represent fictions to be developed.*

*Castaigns: A good way to think about it is to ask ourselves which has been the most productive Venice, historically. The Venice that really existed or the one painted by Canaletto?<sup>(10)</sup>*

*In this case, what was fiction at the beginning ended up being the image of reference to continue building the city.*

*It would be very strange to find in the built project the atmosphere that we had expected since that atmosphere is the projection of a very personal perception. We see this as a value, something new that emerges from a previous subjective view, that when it materializes is revealed as a novelty, as something that can vary very much respect of the initial image, but where the primary argument still works.*

*Pérez: The final image of the project may be different from the initial image, but it is not separated from the argument behind. The image is subordinated to the argument.*

*Varela: The image is not the way in which the project will be seen, but a tool to allow everybody to visualize and manage progress collectively in a long and complex process.*

*Castaigns: Yes, it is rather like that. The conflict between the initial and the final image is more visible and at the same time more seductive, the smaller scale of the project. In urban-territorial projects it is assumed that it is so, even though the traditional protocol does*

*not assume it too much and continues to think that 500 hectares can be projected from design criteria, as if it were a house. The lower the scale of the project, the funnier and more liberating it is to apply our methodology. So long as the generating idea of the project is strictly architectural, like the client's preference, you reach a blind ally and the only thing left is to resign. For instance, if the idea of a project for a house is the character of its lightness and glass, but the client hates glass, then you reach a point of no return. There is no way to negotiate that difference. It is the drama of the traditional architect, of the one who bases his project only on architectural or design criteria. One is liberated of such problems if the project generator, that for us is the argument, is a previous question to the architectural event. Then there is real flexibility.*

***Espósito: Supersudaca works from reality. You have a very different methodology.***

*Pérez: I do not think it is so different; reality, as an object of study, is something very subjective. Supersudaca works from "its" subjective reality. For Fábrica de Paisaje, fiction is a way of understanding reality and operating in it.*

***Varela: In what recent project is this mechanism visible in a variety of different scales?***

*Castaigns: The project of the competition for Neuquén<sup>(11)</sup> has the two scales. On the landscape scale of the viewpoints, it was intended that each one would emerge from a landscape and amplified it instead of framing it. The visitors center, on the other hand, is the expression of the traditional method of building a place, a large animal yard where the*


*animals are still there, but next to a new programme and with traditional materials similar to alabaster. We turned it into something else.*

***Delgado: Is there a philosophy in the function of your office?***

*Castaigns: Fábrica de Paisaje thinks of the territory as a complex field that can be transformed. We always prefer to refer to the landscape instead of other less ambiguous constructions. Landscape is the connective tissue of the territory, which is neither object nor field. We conceive our practice as a machinery to produce landscapes, that is to say, create the cultural, aesthetic, productive, social ethic and economic connections.*

***Varela: And processes, too.***

*Pérez: Thinking of changes along time, of adaptive systems that articulate several registers, is thinking in evolutionary terms. The connection between man and nature is located there. We intend to replace the "aesthetics of confrontation" based on a deeply dialectic model (architecture and landscape; natural and artificial; man and nature, etc.) by a machinery of thinking and action structured from coexistences and multiplicities, activating latent potentials or inducing fictions.*

*Castaigns: Perhaps Brumeville<sup>(12)</sup> is a good example. Because of its more conceptual and utopic condition it works almost like a proposal-manifesto. *

#### NOTES

\* Together with Fabio Ayerra, Martín Cobas, Federico Gastambide and Javier Lanza.

(i) We conceive an imaginary landscape from the reflection around three codes of action: beauty, fiction and distance. These categories (topics that go beyond the

contingent) will allow operating on some processes of the contemporary territory.

Beauty (the seduction of the landscape): The construction of the landscape is, necessarily, an aesthetic construction. Therefore, the landscape is the place for beauty. We believe, then, in something that we could call "active beauty".

Fiction (the invention of landscape). A new landscape exists only if a story gives it meaning, if a narrative construction is capable of inducing reactions and, therefore, meta-stories. The construction of fiction is developed in time (between the "novella", or what has already happened, and the story, or what will happen). Fiction connects the written landscape with the one that is about to be written (what is real-past and what is possible).

Distance (the look of the landscape). Finally, this aesthetic fiction incorporates a peculiarity: distance. The look of the landscape is a distant look. Like the look of the voyeur or the traveller, of the one who constructs the landscape from the displacement and from the stay, it imposes a particular distancing. As Michel Houellebecq suggests in his itinerary, climbing between the idyllic Michelin map and the sordid mycotic microscopy of the tissues in The Possibility of an Island, the landscape wanders between the gigantic and the infinitesimal, and far from finding its locus in a particular scale, it is its continuous contractions and dilations that define its rhythm and its nature.

<http://colectivosarquitecturasa.wordpress.com/2011/05/12/fabrica-de-paisaje/>

(1) Surface: 180.000 m<sup>2</sup>

Program: Conversion of Mausoleum into cultural center.

Landscape, public space and equipment design.

Integration of existing programmes into the project.

Management ideas of the project.

(2) It is part of the Metropolitan Area of Montevideo. It concentrates industries, commerce, fairs and popular events. It used to be a quarrying site.

Population: 69.222

(3) In 1811 the Eastern army under Artigas defeated the Spanish troops under frigate Commander José Posadas.

(4) José Artigas (1764-1850): Uruguayan military officer and statesman; máximum hero of his country.

(5) Tree of the leguminous family, known in Uruguay as the Tree of Artigas.

(6) Name of a number of coastal resorts in the Department of Canelones, Uruguay.

(7) The Territorial Ordinance Plan 98-05 is being revised by the Intendencia Municipal of Montevideo in agreement with the Universidad de la República. <http://agenda.montevideo.gub.uy/proyecto/2241>

(8) Originally the term made reference to drawings easy to market. It refers nowadays to pretentious objects, outdated or in bad taste. See DORFLES, Gillo: *El kitsch; antología del mal gusto* (Kitsch, anothology of bad taste)(Lumen, 1973).

(9) Milan Kundera (Brno, 1929): Czech writer established in France. Author of *La insoportable levedad del ser* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) (1984).

(10) Giovanni Antonio Canal o Canaletto (1697-1768): Venetian painter, famous for his views of Venice. He is one of the main exponents of the pictorial genre called "veduta", consisting in urban paintings in perspective that exalt the beauty of a place with commercial purposes.

(11) Province of the Argentine Patagonia.

Population: 550.344

Density: 5,85 hab./km

Capital: Neuquén

(12) Brumeville is a manuscript that describes a phenomenon that occurred on 1st of January 2013, two years before being written.

## The political dimension of Architecture

Interview with Justin McGuirk

Ana Rascovsky

### Abstract

Justin McGuirk analyzes the causes for the world interest in Latin American town planning and details the reasons that took him to research a new type of architecture, "activist architecture". He emphasizes the social dimension of professionals like Alejandro Aravena, Urban Think Tank, Jorge Mario Jáuregui and Teddy Cruz, and stops to give details of the historic referents that sustain such dimension: the work of John Turner on the Peruvian neighbourhoods, the PREVI housing experiment in Lima and the work of Vilanova Artigas, Sergio Ferro and Carlos Nelson in Brazil.

McGuirk values the creation of urban infrastructures that are not governed by capitalist rules and emphasizes the work of the Tupac Amaru social Movement in the Northeast of Argentina. He stresses that Latin America found a political dignity that the developed world has lost. By means of examples such as the improvement of Paraisópolis and the introduction of alternative transport systems in cities like Caracas, Medellín and Rio de Janeiro, he can assure that Latin America is teaching lessons to the rest of the world.