

Shared utopias

A tower, a house, or a sculpture

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Tatlin's Tower model being built. USSR, 1920. ([Source](#))



Tower of the winds being built. México, 1968. ([Source](#))

In 1920 the Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin designed a monument to the Third International, better known as Tatlin's Tower. A steel and glass structure in the shape of a leaning tower that is both a sculpture and a building. A few years earlier Tatlin had been commissioned by his government to replace the monuments to the Tsar with monuments and sculptures of figures relevant to the revolution, art, and science.

Had it been built, Tatlin's Tower would have been larger than the Eiffel Tower in Paris; it would have housed government representatives in rotating offices with transparent walls, floors, and ceilings; it would have had a radio station at the top; and it would have been built in Saint Petersburg on the edge of the Neva River¹. However, the monument was never built. Since then the Tatlin Tower has remained in the imagination of many artists, resembling the biblical Tower

¹ **Tatlin, or, Ruinophilia.** The avant-garde and the off-modern. Svetlana Boym

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of Babel due to its form and intention, which in turn evokes an even older construction, the Temple of Marduk in Babylon, a 7-story high ziggurat tower.

Tatlin is remembered as one initiator of Russian Constructivism, an artistic movement that sought to achieve a radical change in society through a total integration between politics, art, and science. A cultural revolution of such dimensions required the invention of a radical aesthetic that reflected the utopian idealism of its promoters. The monument to the Third International was destined to be the pinnacle of not only Tatlin but of Constructivism and the Russian Revolution.

The fact that the tower was not built can be seen as a historical symptom of the unsustainability of the revolution, and a premonition of its eventual failure. In 1933 Constructivism, as understood by Tatlin and his colleagues, was gradually outlawed by the Stalinist regime. Time and time again history has shown the unsustainability of ideological systems and cultural revolutions. Utopias are and will always be unattainable. Becoming transcends any perception that may be had of it, however flexible it may be. All the more so it transcends rigid and idealistic perceptions. Becoming eventually breaks any attempt to impose order on it, thus marking periods aligned with infinite revolutions.

Perhaps the only way that a utopia can be put into practice is based on the recognition of its limitations in space, and that it arises temporarily. In this way, large-scale international events such as the Olympics, the World Cup, or an art biennial, could be taken as practical examples of temporary utopias. But beyond the commercial and partisan aspects of the aforementioned events, the intention of cultural and social integration that they promote places them, next to the Tower of Babel, as gigantic utopian projects.

A clear example is the Mexico 68 Olympiad, which was conceived not only as a sporting event. The invitation to participate included both athletes and artists in a proposal for around twenty events in disciplines such as dance, music, poetry, sculpture, and painting. It was in this cultural Olympiad that the German artist living in Mexico, Mathias Goeritz, created one of the most ambitious sculptural projects in public space at the time, the *Route of Friendship*².

Goeritz's project consisted of a series of 19 sculptures made by artists of various nationalities and distributed along a 17-kilometer route that connected the different Olympic venues. One of these sculptures, perhaps the most emblematic of the set, was conceived and built by Gonzalo Fonseca from Uruguay. *The Tower of the Winds*, as its creator named it, is a concrete structure with an inverted conical shape with a truncated tip, hollow inside, and surrounded by geometric bodies derived from spheres and cubes. The sum of these geometric bodies gives rise to a staircase that grows in a spiral around the tower. More or less directly, the *Tower of the Winds*

² Complete information about *Route of Friendship* can be found on the website devoted to the project: <http://www.mexico68.org/ruta>

evokes both the Tower of Babel and the Tower of Tatlin. This becomes evident when knowing Fonseca's original intention to create, in a similar way than Tatlin, a habitable sculpture³.

Fonseca had studied in the workshop of Joaquín Torres García after abandoning his studies at the Faculty of Architecture in Montevideo. From Torres García he inherited the idealism characteristic of the artistic avant-gardes, the dream of the transformation of life through art. Shortly before his death, Fonseca was reunited with the *Tower of the Winds*, which after 25 years of neglect, had been restored and turned into a space for experimentation and workshop of the Mexican artist and architect Pedro Reyes.

The workshop and experimentation space set up inside the tower by Reyes in 1996, and which remained in operation until 2002⁴, was a meeting place for artists from different latitudes. It became the flagship of the new generations of artists from Mexico City⁵. Reyes' project infused life not only into Fonseca's habitable sculpture but in some way fulfilled the avant-garde and utopian dream, from Torres García to Tatlin.

Pedro Reyes belongs to a generation of artists with a growing interest in transforming their community through intervention projects in the public space with clear political and social implications. The work of this generation of artists is frequently identified with terms such as *relational art*⁶ or *social sculpture*⁷. A point in case is the group exhibition *Social Sculpture: a new generation of artists from Mexico City* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (USA) in 2007. This group show included sculpture, installation, photography, video, and conceptual art by a score of artists, including Reyes.

Abraham Cruzvillegas, another of the artists included in the show, is of particular interest to understand the use that is given in Mexico to the term *social sculpture*. Recognized for being the author of works constructed from objects collected and taken from everyday environments,

³ The *Tower of the Winds* is the 6th station in the route

<http://www.mexico68.org/ruta/estacion06.html>

⁴ <http://cargocollective.com/torredelosvientos>

⁵ In the lecture *Pseudomuseos: sobre el museo Salinas y otros ejemplos de la museografía parasitaria en México*, given by the Mexican curator and art critic Cuauhtémoc Medina in 2002, he briefly mentions the similarity between the *Tower of the Winds*, the Tatlin Tower and the Tower of Babel, in addition to placing Pedro Reyes's project in context. It can be consulted at:

<http://www.micromuseo.org.pe/lecturas/cmedina.html>

⁶ Relational art is largely derived from the theories of Nicolas Borriaud, who in 1998 wrote the book *Esthétique relationnelle* (Relational Aesthetics) where he describes works that give greater importance to the social aspects and interpersonal relationships that the work implies, than the object itself.

⁷ Social sculpture is a term coined by the German artist Joseph Beuys, and which he used to exemplify the transformative power of art, in which he deeply believed. According to Beuys, one who practice social sculpture creates with elements that transcend art. Using language, thought and direct action, the artist is capable of inserting or modifying social structures in the community in which is immersed.

Cruzvillegas reflects a particular interest in the social aspects of art, the construction of identity, and the political implications of his practice. This is perceptible in one of his recent projects entitled *Self-construction*.

After he participated in an artistic residency in Glasgow (Scotland, 2008), Cruzvillegas began a series of artistic events aggregated under the same concept and name. These events include the assembly of various objects found in the exhibition site, the collective creation of songs, and a series of performances activated by actors and musicians, where the scenography and the objects used remain later as works on display.

In his work, Cruzvillegas constantly refers to the history and the experiences related to his family house-building process, holding this memory as a decisive factor in his sculptural practice. Here one can find coordinates such as improvisation with materials found in the place, recycling objects that find another function, or the random and disjointed assembly of incomplete things. All characteristics of precarious circumstances in irregular settlements and marginalized areas. In the work and thought of Cruzvillegas, it is possible to find a sort of parallel look in a world where the survival instinct is the forger of the environment, the builder of the context. In his sculptures, one can realize a positive reading of what, in principle, might be aberrant or negative. To such an extent that the original intention of the artist, whatever it may be, gets hidden behind an obvious artistic aestheticization of something that is simply life.

The visible characteristics of self-construction, that is, of non-professional construction with insufficient or precarious materials, determine a prominent aesthetic of a house first, then of a neighborhood, then of a city, coming to lead the collective imagination of its inhabitants. In an evident state of emergency where survival is no longer taken as exceptional and becomes the norm, Cruzvillegas' work seems to retrace his steps and show that there is always enough space for aesthetic and political intentionality.

Now would be convenient to recall the story of David, the protagonist of *La Perrera*, a film by Manuel Nieto (Uruguay, 2006), a story where the building of a house becomes a metaphor for an apparent state of spiritual precariousness. David returns to live with his father after losing a school scholarship that allowed him some independence. To regain his former status, David must build his own house, as commanded by his father, who is both the provider of the resources and the construction materials.

Throughout the film, we see how David may not want or know how to regain his self-sufficiency, since there are hidden elements in the relationship with his father that prevent it. David avoids in incredibly absurd and frustrating ways (for the viewer) the construction of his house, to finally complete together with his dysfunctional friends and collaborators, an equally dysfunctional and deformed house.

In David's eyes, the house becomes an unattainable utopia. Like Tatlin's tower, which for many was a crude and unworkable project, and like the Tower of Babel as a metaphor for the

breakdown of communication between human beings, the house of David can be a sculpture (like Cruzvillegas' sculptures) formed and inhabited by the manifest wishes of its builders.

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