If architecture is the knowledge necessary to build places in which humans live, the jail – a place in which human beings are forced to live without being able to leave – is architecture at its purest definition. The fact that the biggest building built in Uruguay in 2017 was a jail, and that this jail’s neighbor was another ‘freer’ jail, are the starting points for a project that questions and reflects on the convoluted relationships between architecture and freedom.

Which montage between two images/elements could be imagined that would result in something different between and outside these two, which would not represent a compromise but would instead belong to a different order – roughly the way someone might tenaciously pound two dull stones together to create a spark in the dark? Whether this spark, which one could also call the spark of the political, can be created at all is a question of this articulation (Steyerl, 2016).

‘Prison to Prison, an intimate story between two architectures’ was Uruguay’s official contribution to the 16th International Architecture Exhibition at the 2018 Venice Biennale. It is a project that explores the existence of an unprecedented ‘freespace’ in a place where it is least expected and and which is closely related to its larger opposite.
Although it may seem hard to believe, the largest building erected in Uruguay in 2017 was a prison. In one of the most consolidated and renowned democracies in Latin America, such a symbolic fact—almost unnoticed—surprises, but also speaks about our collective fears and desires, as well as of the scope and limitations of our discipline.

The building discussed is the new detention facility called Unit Number 1 Prison of Punta de Rieles, next to the Unit Number 6 Prison of Punta Rieles, or ‘cárcel pueblo’ (village-like prison), Uruguay.

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(sharing a party wall!) to the existing Unit Number 6 Prison of Punta de Rieles, known as the ‘cárcel pueblo’ (village-like prison). This, constitutes a unique experience for both our country and the continent, as the prison – with 600 inmates – is understood as a vivid, vibrant town that imitates urban logic, forming an unprecedented ‘freespace’ of collective negotiations and projects in a place where it is least expected: the Uruguayan prison system.

Since the inauguration of the new center in 2018, two jails – surprisingly designed during the same government period, but opposed in their views on punishment, seclusion, surveillance, technology, displacements, space and, above all, humanity – coexist in the same plot in the outskirts of Montevideo, in an almost schizoid way. The outcome: an actual over-30-hectares gigantic architectural oxymoron.

Even more fascinating when trying to understand the meaning of this oxymoron as architects is the fact that Uruguayan architects designed neither of these prisons. The new one echoes the formula of an abstract foreign model, implemented following the guidelines of the private company that built it, while the ‘cárcel pueblo’ has built itself based on both pre-existing constructions and other carried out by inmates themselves, regardless of any disciplinary or academic interest.

Faced with this irony and in the context of the 2018 Biennale edition, it is relevant to ask ourselves: is there a more architectural program than a prison? A place where sleeping, eating, walking, talking,
sharing, thinking and looking are actions defined by the architectural framework where they take place. Also, can we inquire about the architectural notion of ‘freespace’ in a site that may be its main opposite? The answer is ‘Prison to Prison.’

Then, like primitive men, forced to carefully analyze what surrounded them to decide cautiously how to act, as survival depended on that, we will be able to hold with strength these two large stones made of concrete and brick and pound them violently so as to – in that moment, by that forced collision of opposites – detonate, as in Hito Steyerl’s quote opening this text, the spark of the political.

Thus, ‘Prison to Prison, an intimate story between two architectures’ explores the juxtaposition of these two different realities to establish dialogues that exceed the object study. It is then an excuse to reconnect with architecture and its generous, necessary cultural dimension enabling unexpected empowerments. ARQ

Bibliografía / Bibliography

PRISON TO PRISON
AN INTIMATE STORY BETWEEN TWO ARCHITECTURES

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