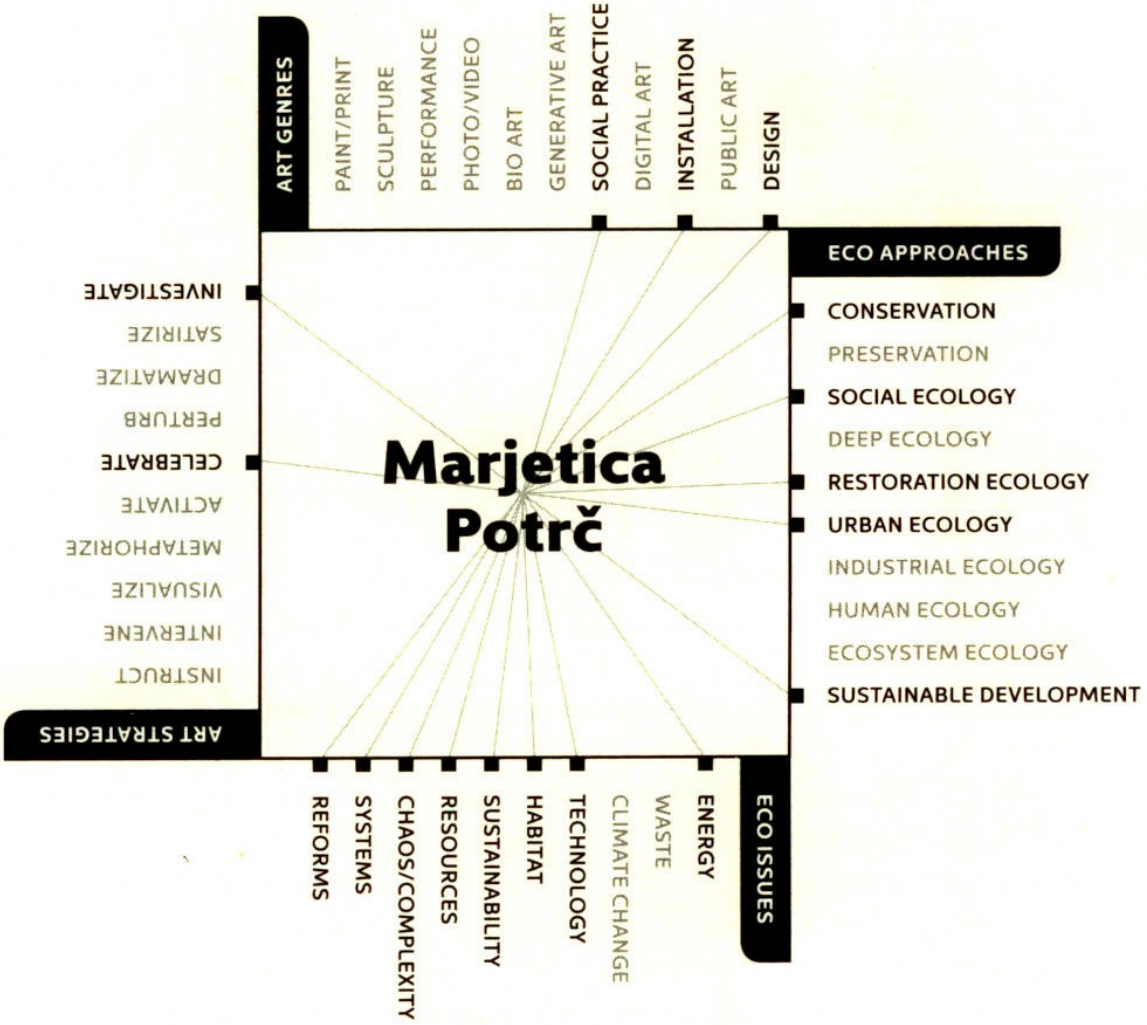


DIY Renewal for Slums and Condos

Born 1953, in Ljubljana, Slovenia

MANIFESTATIONS of the do-it-yourself movement have roared through US culture with roller coaster speed. While DIY always refers to self-expression and self-reliance, the course it has charted in the United States has been erratic:

1950s: Postwar DIY meant self-conducted home improvement and car repair undertaken in the name of cost-saving economies.

1960s: Hippie DIY involved bread baking, leather crafting, zine publishing, yurt building, and herbal

medicine making produced in communal living units and sold in cooperative outlets.

1970s and 1980s: Punk DIY was antiestablishment, anticapitalist, anti–mass production, and anti–conspicuous consumerism.

1990s: Grunge DIY involved low-budget alternatives to the glam scene that was being hyped by the mainstream media.

2000s: Martha Stewart DIY introduced homemakers to hands-on craft activities for entertaining and decorating. At the same time, "do-it-yourself" advocates shifted to "do-it-ourselves." These DIY advocates band together to establish community-supported agriculture, farmers markets, slow food consortiums, eco villages, and local currencies.

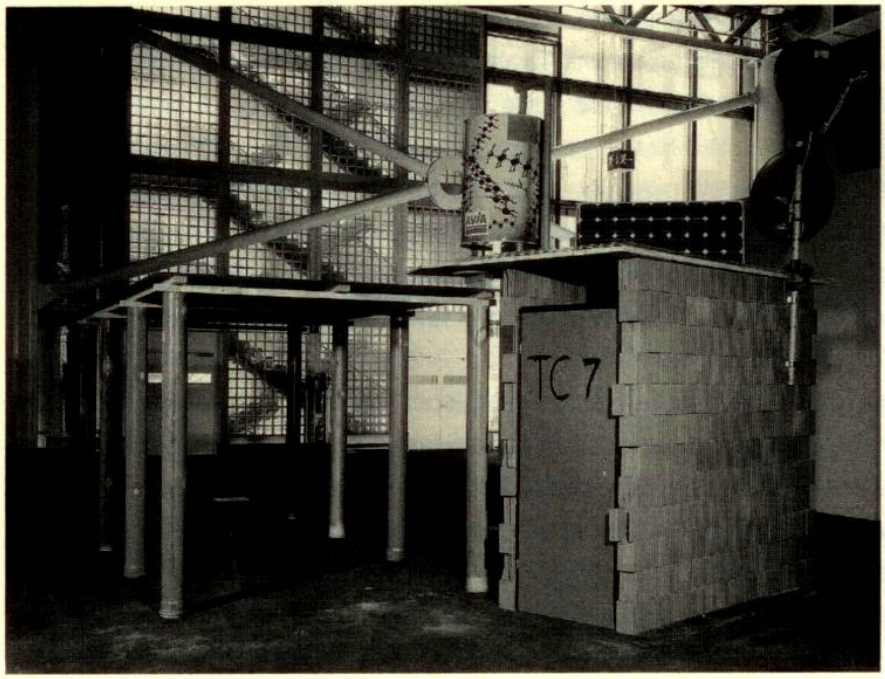
Marjetica Potrč's contribution to this ongoing DIY excursion is best appreciated by considering the cultural context in which it originated. She was born and educated in Slovenia, where a "do it for the state" economic and political system prevailed until the 1990s. According to the mandates of Soviet-style socialism, it was the state's responsibility, not the people's, to provide the basic needs of the citizens. DIY self-expression and DIY self-reliance were viewed as traitorous acts frequently punished by authoritarian dictators and secret police.

Reaction against suppression of self-responsibility provided the ideal impetus to apply DIY strategies to seemingly insurmountable economic and social problems associated with slums. Potrč explains why: "Today, there is not much Arcadian landscape left for us to ponder. Instead, we find ourselves trying to understand how we as individuals can define our existence against the urban terrain of the megalopolis."[1] Statistics confirm her choice of subject. *The State of the World's Cities 2010–2011*, a report published by the UN, predicts that slum-dwelling populations could climb to two billion over the next thirty years.[2] According to the UN's description of a slum, all these people will be afflicted with insufficient safe water, inadequate access to sanitation, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding, and insecurity.[3] These dire conditions pose a double jeopardy because they are harmful to residents and to habitats. Supporting growing urban populations in a sustainable manner is the focus of Potrč's DIY art practice.

Potrč travels extensively to discover how slum dwellers currently cope with deficiencies and figure out how to tackle the problems they can't attend to. She has visited shantytowns, barrios, slums, ghettos, and favelas in South Africa, Ireland, Slovenia, Brazil, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico to search for resourceful DIY strategies that apply to slum conditions. Because she maintains that "the main problems in the barrios are not buildings but infrastructure,"[4] her DIY efforts focus on helping slum dwellers attain and maintain their own sanitation, sewage, and electricity. She has no use for a studio, since her artistic inquiries are conducted on-site and her exhibitions consist of artifacts she encounters in the slums and delivers to museums and galleries.

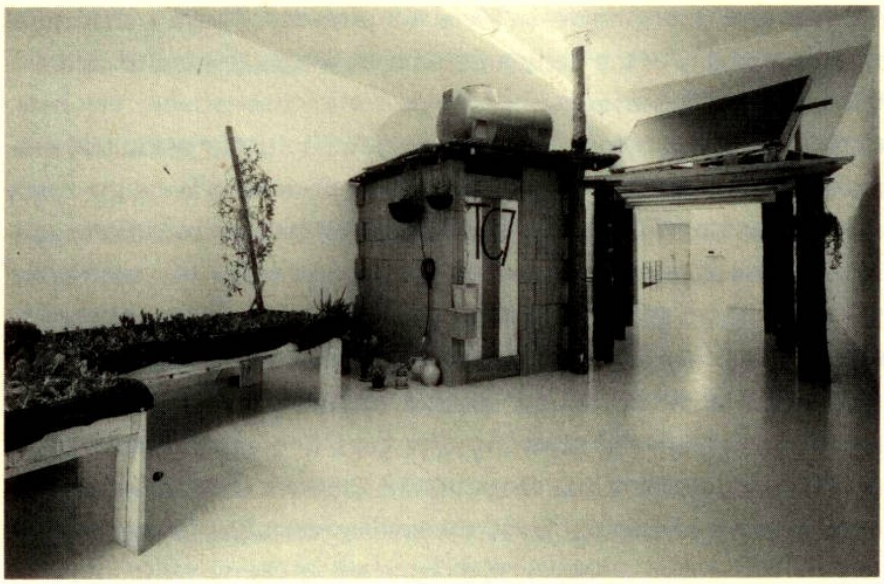
Potrč noted one significant form of abundance that impoverished urban populations enjoy, that their more wealthy neighbors lack. They have bountiful opportunities for DIY practices, which is due, ironically, to municipal neglect and governmental incompetence.

Duncan Village in South Africa provides one compelling case study of crowded and squalid conditions that engaged Potrč's artistic attentions. In the late 1980s during the apartheid era, thousands of Africans flocked to Duncan Village. Shacks sprung up every-



Marjetica Potrč | Duncan Village Core Unit | 2003, third installation Art Fair Basel, Basel, Switzerland | Building materials, energy, communication, and water supply in infrastructure | Service core unit 8'6" × 5'3" × 6'10"

PHOTO: ROBERT OGRAJENSEK COURTESY MARJETICA POTRČ AND GALERIE NORDENHAKE, BERLIN/ STOCKHOLM



Marjetica Potrč | Duncan Village Core Unit | 2003, fourth installation Galerie Museum ar/ge kunst, Bolzano, Italy | Building materials, energy, communication, and water supply in infrastructure, and vegetable garden | Service core unit 8'6" × 5'3" × 6'10"

PHOTO: MARTIN PARDATSCHER COURTESY MARJETICA POTRČ

Marjetica Potrč | Duncan Village Core Unit | 2004, fifth installation 1st Lodz Biennial, Lodz, Poland | Building materials, energy, communication and water supply in infrastructure, and vegetable garden | Service core unit 8'6" × 5'3" × 6'10"

PHOTO: MARJETICA POTRČ AND GALERIE NORDENHAKE, BERLINSTOCKHOLM / COURTESY 1ST LODZ BIENNIAL

where, cluttering public spaces, playgrounds, and even the backyards of municipal buildings. In this densely packed village lacking in sanitation, mortality rates of children and cases of tuberculosis soared.[5] The apartheid state attempted to correct these mounting problems by forcibly relocating the village residents to mass suburban housing in a township outside of the village. This well-meaning plan backfired. Instead of being grateful for more spacious and sanitary conditions, the villagers resented being moved to housing they viewed as drab and alienating. They missed the haphazard clustering that allowed them to form the closely knit communities they customarily relied upon for cultural, social, and economic support.

When Potrč visited Duncan Village in 2002, she discovered evidence of a progressive housing scheme that respected the way of life of the residents. The new policy permitted residents to build their own shacks in locations they chose. Construction occurred around core units provided by the municipality. These mass-produced, prefab units were equipped with high-tech infrastructure solutions like photovoltaic panels for independent energy generation, as well as satellite dishes for access to communications. They also contained low-tech infrastructure for strategies like rainwater harvesting for water collection. In addition, they were outfitted with a toilet, sink, and stove and a secure enclosure to store valuable belongings. Walls, windows, and doors, however, were not provided. These architectural elements remained the responsibility of the occupants, who were accustomed to cobbling their own shelters with materials they scavenged.

The promising solutions provided by core units not only fulfill the DIY pursuit of self-reliance; the environmental efficiencies that result are manifold. Core units avoid the costly and disruptive processes involved in connecting gerrymandered slum communities to centralized utility systems; they tend to be safer, more reliable, and less costly than centralized systems because they are monitored and managed by their owners; they depend upon local resources like sunlight and rain, not fossil fuels as municipal utilities commonly do.

Potrč presents these tokens of her travels in museums, exhibiting each "case study" as a full-scale reconstruction of the makeshift dwelling. She goes to great lengths to avoid presenting them as formal sculptures. Her creative contribution to each art installation is not aesthetic. Referring to herself as a conceptual artist, she invents strategies to preserve the egalitarian opportunities and generative processes that characterize shanty dwellings. Thus, Potrč's eco art practice showcases the resourceful infrastructure initiative as well as the aesthetic and material inventiveness of the individuals who design and fabricate the walls and roof of their homes. For example, *Duncan Village Core Unit* (2002–2003) was exhibited in five museums, in five countries, in five different manners.[6] Potrč perpetuated the DIY transformation that characterizes its slum origin by assigning the museums' curators the task of completing the core units at their sites. The instructions Potrč provided regarding the construction were so general that the curators could not avoid being self-expressive. They were told to "use concrete blocks or their equivalent" and "paint the structure in a local, happy color."[7] As a result, the same unit and the same instructions generated a different artwork at each location, ensuring that the idiosyncratic nature of decision making in shantytowns was maintained. Through these means the humble buildings Potrč features celebrate a new social contract where personal expression filters throughout a legitimized and bureaucratized society and becomes apparent in the uniqueness of each dwelling. Potrč explains, "The erosion of traditional barriers to creation marks the onset of the DIY future, when everyone is a potential designer (or architect, or engineer, or author) of integrated experiences."[8]

Potrč reinforces this democratic message by stating, "I don't need to control the production. I don't have to be there to build the work and to agonize over materials or colors. If a team decides to put up a core unit, they take care of all these decisions themselves. The core unit has a life of its own. It changes and grows or disappears. . . . There is nothing wrong with letting a situation take over. A dialogue is always more productive than a monologue."[9]

With or without core units, shantytowns are hubs for DIY construction and design. Potrč celebrates these liberties, noting that modernist design is not merely a style; it is "a way to represent the authority and power of the state."[10] Wealthier urban dwellers might envy the expressive outlets enjoyed by their poorer counterparts. Owners of condos and renters of apartments relinquish self-reliance because they are dependent on municipalities and corporations to supply their material needs, generate their energy, manage their wastes, and design their dwellings. Furthermore, they sacrifice the public display of their tastes and creativity by occupying architecture that utilizes standardized construction materials that arrive from places the occupants have never visited, are chosen by architects they do not know, and are formed into generic living and working spaces they must accommodate. Shanties are playful, populist, spontaneous, and personal. Their DIY design conventions might resuscitate urban experiences of the wealthy.

Thus, core units reverse the stultifying anonymity of middle- and upper-class neighborhoods by fulfilling the twin components of the DIY ethic. One is self-reliance, associated with independent infrastructure facilities. The other is self-expression, activated by individual design decisions. People at all ends of the social spectrum might take heed when Potrč states, "The present time is about self-reliance, individual initiative, and small-scale projects,"[11] qualities that naturally prevail in slum neighborhoods.

In sum, rather than returning from her travels into downtrodden neighborhoods around the world with a message of misery and gloom, Potrč highlights the adaptive strategies she discovers during her forays. Whereas others may envision the need for a bulldozer, she discovers hope and pragmatic possibilities that not only aid the socially and economically unprivileged; they benefit privileged museumgoers as well. Derelict structures are presented as model ecological living spaces and works of art. Potrč explains, "I believe that the structures produced by these communities convey the aesthetic and political power of today's society simply by the manner in which they were made."[12] Potrč's art thereby affirms her belief that in the future, states will be founded on survival strategies that are optimized by local knowledge, spontaneity, and flexibility.[13] By featuring Duncan Village, Potrč coaxes into public consciousness three virtues derived from an area ridden with crime, congestion, squalor, and disease: DIY self-expressiveness, DIY self-reliance, and DIY sustainability.

NOTES

1 Marjetica Potrč, "There Is Strength in Movement," *Marjetica Potrč: Next Stop, Kiosk* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2003), 110.

2 David Kay, "Shack Settlement Planning: Duncan Village, South Africa." http://www.lulu.com/items/volume_62/1728000/1728641/1/print/1728641.pdf.

3 Ibid.

4 Michael Rush, *Marjetica Potrč: Urgent Architecture* (Lake Worth, FL: Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 2004), 11.

5 David Kay, "Shack Settlement Planning: Duncan Village, South Africa." http://www.lulu.com/items/volume_62/1728000/1728641/1/print/1728641.pdf.

6 Through a Sequence of Space, Nordenhake Gallery, Berlin, 2002. PARA > SITES: Who is

moving the global city?, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2003. Art Unlimited, Art Fair Basel, Basel, Switzerland, 2003. Urban Strategies, ar/ge kunst Galerie Museum, Bolzano, Italy, 2003. 1st Lodz Biennial, Lodz, Poland, 2004

7 Marjetica Potrč: Institut Valencia d'Art Modern 22-V/7-IX (Valencia: IVAM, 2003), 36.

8 Ibid.

9 Marjetica Potrč, Kunstlerhaus Bethanien (Berlin: Philip Morris Kunstforderung, 2001), 40.

10 Marjetica Potrč, "There Is Strength in Movement," *Marjetica Potrč: Next Stop, Kiosk* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2003), 106.

11 Marjetica Potrč, "Five Ways to Urban Independence," a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Marjetica Potrč: Next Stop, Kiosk* (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2003).

12 Ibid.

13 Marjetica Potrč, "Future Talk Now with Marjetica Potrč," a videotaped discussion at The New School. http://fora.tv/2007/11/01/Future_Talk_Now_with_Marjetica_Potrč.