

A House of Parts

Admiration for the resourcefulness shown by the beleaguered populations of overcrowded communities shapes Marjetica Potrc's major new work and the traveling exhibition that showcases it.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

The problems of cities—sprawl, crime, congestion and insufficient services being among them—have inspired numerous solutions over the last century. Some of these, like Robert Moses's grandiose plans for New York and Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's deeply flawed Brasília, were realized on an ambitious scale and predicated on a vision of the metropolis as a well-oiled machine. Others stressed a suburban ideal as an alternative to overdevelopment. That lineage runs from Frank Lloyd Wright's unbuilt "Broadacre City" to commercial utopias like Reston, Va., and Disney's Celebration, Fla. (currently on the auction block), planned communities that promised to reinstate 19th-century virtues of intimacy and neighborliness. A related but more socially ambiguous impulse lies behind the late 20th-century explosion of gated communities, which both protect and isolate inhabitants from the vagaries of the world outside.

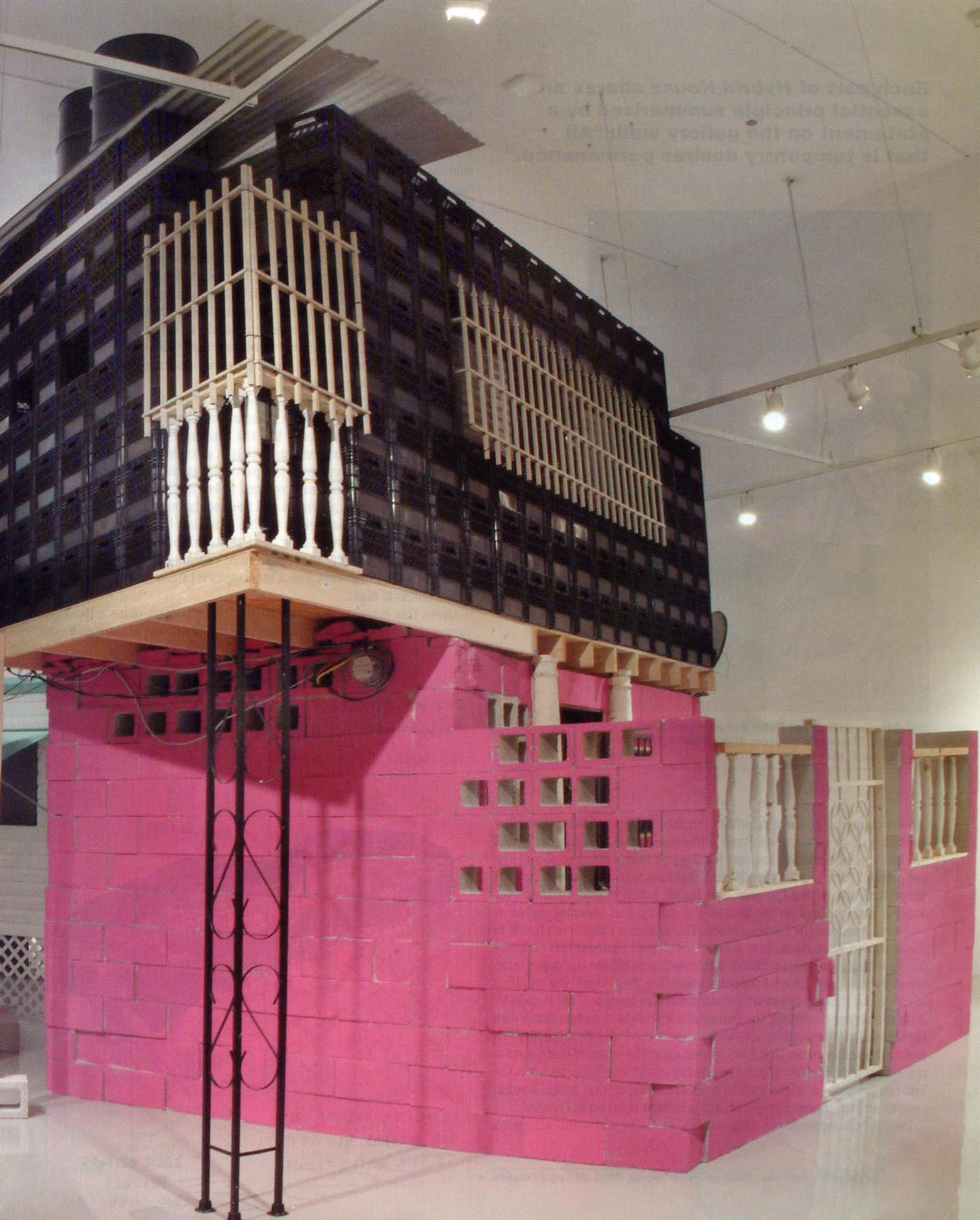
Underlying all such models of community life is an ideal of spatial and social order. Nothing could be further from the urban chaos celebrated by the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrc, the winner of the 2000 Hugo Boss Prize. Potrc's vision of the city has been honed by close observation of such phenomena as the barrios of Caracas, the townships of South Africa, gypsy settlements in Belfast and refugee housing in Ljubljana. In her view, these urban environments have been shaped by a series of invasions in a battle for territory waged against the inhabitants of the "formal city" (those beneficiaries of laws, zoning and official planning) by the denizens of the "informal city," who, being without property and protections, must take what they need. In a loose parallel with evolutionary theory, informal cities emerge as a result of selective adaptation, as competing organisms struggle for survival.

"Urgent Architecture," an exhibition of Potrc's work at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art (PBICA), brought together drawings, photographs of earlier projects and prototypes of ingenious tools designed to solve specific urban needs. These served to frame the pièce de résistance: a monumental architectural structure commissioned by the PBICA that incorporates building elements from three informal city situations. *Hybrid House: Caracas, West Bank, West Palm Beach* (2003) dominated the two-story gallery. Visible here more or less as a whole from a second-floor balcony, it is designed to slowly unfold for the visitor who walks around it at ground level.

Viewed from one angle, the first story of *Hybrid House* consists of a stacked cinder-block structure painted bright pink. This building type, reflecting the houses that spring up in the barrios of Caracas, has simple windows and a door fitted with protective bars made of turned wooden



Marjetica Potrc: Hybrid House: Caracas, West Bank, West Palm Beach, 2003, building materials, communication and energy infrastructure, dimensions variable; commissioned by Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art. Photo Michael Price. Images this article courtesy Palm Beach ICA.



Each part of *Hybrid House* shares an essential principle summarized by a statement on the gallery wall: "All that is temporary desires permanence."



Still from the DVD, Hippo Water Roller Project, 2002, 3 minutes, 12 seconds. Courtesy Hippo Water Roller Project, South Africa.

dowels painted a contrasting white. Perched on top and misaligned is a quotation of an Israeli West Bank settlement house. Its building blocks are black plastic milk crates, and it is topped with a sheet of corrugated red metal. Again, windows are barred, this time with a tight metal grid. A water tank sits on the flat roof. The Israeli house is seen to loom over another structure set on the floor of the gallery that becomes visible as one circles around the Caracas home. This mimes a Palestinian house in the occupied West Bank. It is austere, fabricated of unpainted concrete blocks with a blue door and small windows that perforate the upper quarter of the building. Its roof supports a satellite dish, signifying an effort to reach out that contrasts with the fortresslike quality of the facade.

As the viewer continues, the corner of a metal-sided mobile home with lime green awnings comes into view. This is the Palm Beach house—a nod to the trailer parks that have sprung up at the edges of that prosperous community. Finally, coming nearly full circle, one happens upon the last component—a white walk-in box containing a “dry” toilet, a reference to an experimental project Potrc is collaborating on in Caracas.

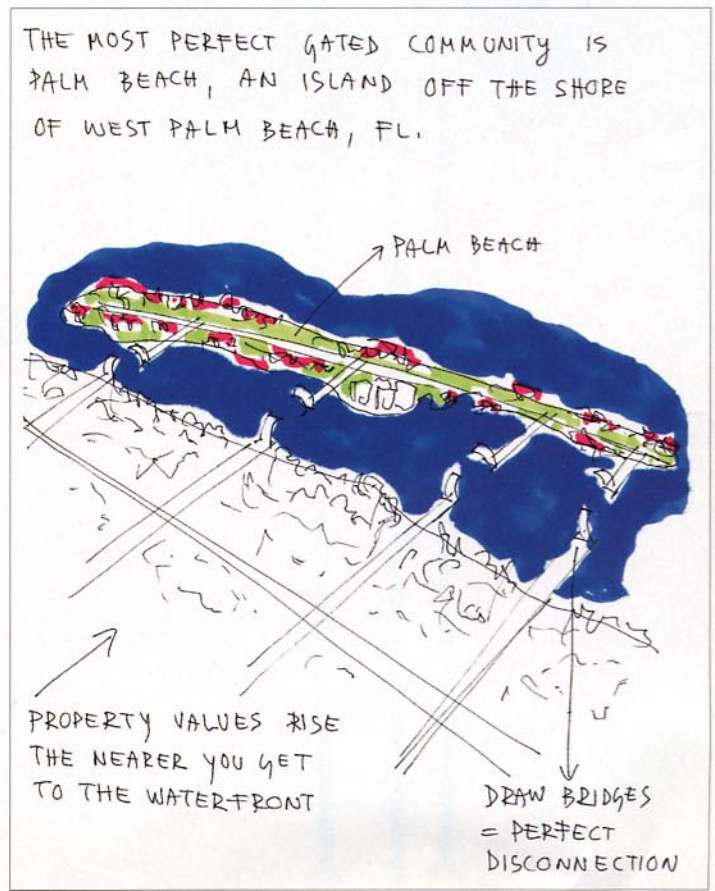
Despite the appearance of a number of doors and small alleyways

between elements, there is no physical entry save for that into the outhouse. Instead, the composite building seems to guard its secrets, the barred apertures underscoring its function as a defensive structure. Near the outhouse, a tangle of wires snakes out of the roofs and is attached to a utility pole, enacting the informal city's appropriation of official energy sources. *Hybrid House* has the dynamic presence of a huge Cubist sculpture, threatening to shatter into its constituents. Nevertheless, each part shares an essential principle summarized by a statement scrawled on the gallery wall: “All that is temporary desires permanence.”

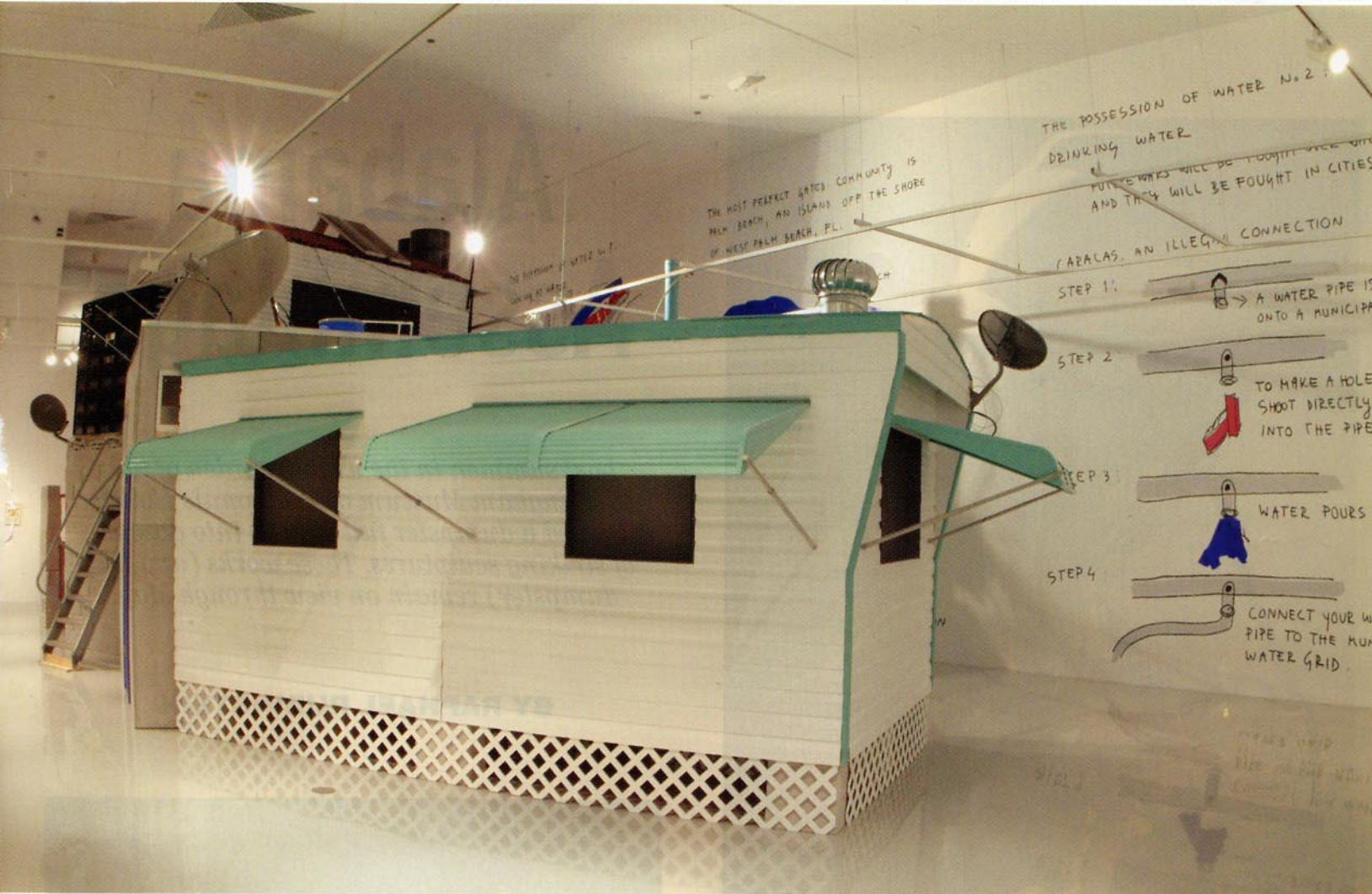
In this and her other works, some for galleries, some outdoors in places like Caracas, Münster and Berlin, Potrc calls for an understanding of urban space as a place of conflict and negotiation. In both interviews and statements written on the walls as part of her exhibitions, as was the case here, she turns to militaristic rhetoric to describe the situation. “Future wars will be fought over water and they will be fought in cities,” says a text near the dry toilet. Nearby another statement maintains, “the divided city breeds invasions.”

According to Potrc, the old dichotomy of public/private has little meaning in a world where open space is temporarily or permanently colonized by guerrilla “invaders,” like the Caracas barrio builders, or surrounded by defensive mechanisms, such as gated fences and walls. In the catalogue, Potrc elaborates on the particular circumstances of the West Bank, where Palestinians are confined to low ground levels, sandwiched between the hillsides, air rights and the underground aquifer claimed by the Israelis. The artist refers to this situation by placing the Israeli dwelling above and overlooking the Palestinian one. Potrc sees another kind of dual “ownership” in the actions of Venezuelan vendors who transform the public highways into a marketplace by day and then withdraw to the barrio at night.

Given this context, the Palm Beach trailer doesn't quite work. Potrc makes the case that the mobile home is the underside of the gated com-



Inkjet print, from the “Wanting Water” series, 2003, 29 1/2 by 21 inches.



View of Hybrid House and part of the "Wanting Water" wall drawings, 2003. Photo Michael Price.

munity that in this part of Florida represents the formal city. Drawings refer to the drawbridges that separate Palm Beach proper, which is an island dotted with exclusive shopping malls and private communities, from the Florida mainland. These arrangements serve as a foil for the low-cost housing solution provided by mobile homes. However, mobile homes are not really equivalent to Caracas shacks or West Bank dwellings, for trailer parks generally require zoning and legitimate land ownership or leasing. A more apt American equivalent might be the shantytowns erected in the center of various cities (New York's Tompkins Square squats of the early 1990s come to mind) or the temporary and ever-shifting homeless encampments that mushroom in marginal spaces along highways, under bridges or in subway tunnels. The inclusion of the trailer clearly stems from Potrc's desire to find a local version of her ad hoc housing arrangements, something that she has done in other settings. However, one couldn't help feeling that the Palm Beach trailer would seem even more inappropriate when the whole exhibition moved on to the MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Also making a different kind of point, the dry toilet refers to a project Potrc has undertaken in La Vega, an outlying area of Caracas, in collaboration with the Israeli architect Liyat Esakov. The dry toilet collects waste and turns it into fertilizer. Because it does not depend on city services, it solves one of the dilemmas of sanitation in a settlement without legitimate access to water. Working with the La Vega neighborhood association, Potrc and Esakov set up a number of dry toilets throughout the barrio; more were ordered following a six-month trial period in 2003.

The dry toilet is one of several responses Potrc has generated to problems that arise in the informal city. The exhibition contains a selection of her nonelectricity-dependent "power tools," simple and often jury-rigged

items that efficiently address specific needs. The *Hippo Water Roller*, for instance, is a large plastic water drum outfitted with wheels. Its great capacity and ease of transport obviate the need for women in communities without plumbing to make multiple daily trips to a well or other water source. A video produced by the artist illustrates (and ideally furthers) Potrc's efforts to raise money to make this simple labor-saving device available in rural South Africa. Other power tools include a *Clockwork Mobile Telephone Charger*, which recharges cell phones with a crank mechanism, and a *Survival Kit*, a set of basic medicines and food supplies intended for distribution by the Mexican government to would-be immigrants to the U.S.

The *Hippo Water Roller* and other "power tools" as well as the dry toilet are reminiscent of Krzysztof Wodiczko's homeless vehicles, designed to reinvent the transient individual as an independent entrepreneur. They also share a kinship with Yona Friedman's no-income housing constructed from industrial castoffs. Like the improvised dwellings that Potrc celebrates and reconstructs, her inventions exist somewhere between symbolic gestures and real solutions to the enormous problems of economic inequity. They are at best stopgap efforts, but, as Potrc makes clear, that may be the best we can hope for in a world disillusioned by unfulfilled utopian promises. □

"Marjetica Potrc: Urgent Architecture" is currently on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. [May 6-July 11]. The show was organized by the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, Lake Worth, Fla., where it debuted [Nov. 22, 2003-Feb. 29, 2004], and was curated by the institute's director, Michael Rush. It is accompanied by a 68-page, fully illustrated catalogue with essays by Rush, architect Liyat Esakov and others, and a DVD that includes an interview with the artist.

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