

**Marjetica Potrč:**  
**Local Democracies**

*The following is a slightly edited version of a talk Marjetica Potrč presented at the East Coast Europe (ECE) round-table discussion, moderated by Markus Miessen, in the Theresa Lang Auditorium of the Vera List Centre for Art and Politics, New School University, in New York on 15 April 2008.*

That was great. I will also be talking about democracy but from a completely different perspective.<sup>1</sup>

I would actually argue that local democracies have been developing on the margins of Europe and the US, and I will show a few examples from three of the projects I have done in the last three years. I'll be showing slides from the Western Balkans – from the *Lost Highway Expedition*, where I was with Srdjan<sup>2</sup> – then from Acre, a state in Amazonia in Brazil, and finally from New Orleans, which in a way is also on the margins of the United States.

<sup>1</sup> The previous speaker was Reinier de Graaf, an architect with Rem Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture, who had been speaking about the architecture OMA designed in China and its role in building democracy in that country.

<sup>2</sup> The architect Srdjan Jovanović Weiss was one of the co-organisers of the *Lost Highway Expedition* (2006); he is also the founder of the Normal Architecture Office (NAO) and a founding member of the School of Missing Studies.



Let me start with a nice picture from Kosovo's independence celebration. Kosovo became independent from Serbia on 17 February 2008. It is the last stage in the balkanisation of ex-Yugoslavia – its fragmentation – and I was particularly attracted by all the US flags that were everywhere in the crowd. Of course, when you look at the US flag, you think of freedom, democracy and the promotion of democracy by the US.



When you consider how people in this region understand flags – I will show slides taken in Prishtina and Tirana – it's something quite different. The American flag here on this building doesn't refer to America; it refers to an individual who lives in the US. What I'm trying to say is that everyone in this region is actually building local democracies starting from their personal connections.



This is a beautiful picture from Tirana. Half of the city is self-built. There is enormous energy that the people put in there, and of course the region is known for its parallel systems.



A good example is Prishtina, the capital city of Kosovo. This is my drawing. Before it became independent, Kosovo

was governed by three parallel governments. When we were on the *Lost Highway Expedition*, we were reminded of the European Union, because the European Union also has different overlapping governments, like Schengen Europe, NATO Europe, membership Europe and so on. Kosovo was governed by the Kosovo government, by the Serbian government and, thirdly, as a UN protectorate. And in this space where no one governs, the individual becomes smallest state and, of course, marks out his or her own territory. Here you see a flag perched on the edge of a territory – a small family house with a small economy. I like this picture so much because it is exactly here that the word “balkanisation” changes meaning. Before, the word was regarded as a negative term because it meant the fragmentation of unity. After we experienced the *Lost Highway Expedition*, “balkanisation” turned into a positive term. Suddenly it stood for particles and group identities, and was actually the voice of democracy built from below.



Here is a reminder that this has been a process of only fifteen years, more or less. Of course, Kosovo in 2008 is merely the last part of it.



So there was a fragmentation of the territory. But the fragmenting didn't stop with territories. It has continued, and one of the most striking examples is the “ideal residential unit”. As you probably know, ex-Yugoslavia was known for its beautiful modernist architecture and modernist ideology – the social state and so on. And it was normal for an apartment-block neighbourhood back in the eighties to house some 10,000 people. This has shrunk dramatically in the period after modernism.



Now two new architectural typologies have emerged: the Urban Village and the Urban Villa. Here we're looking at two examples – on the left is an Urban Villa from Skopje, on the right, from Ljubljana. People who want to live together move into an Urban Villa. Some fifteen to twenty families live in the same building. I also want to point out the incredible decorations these buildings have. The face of architecture becomes increasingly important.



Here are two examples of private houses in Prishtina. As you can see, the decorations just keep growing until they turn into kitsch. The façades become a second skin for the people who build these houses. They reflect their personal styles. As Srdjan said, “Each house is an island by itself.” It is very interesting also that these are always “pseudo” styles. And of course the skin is important: it’s like the skin of your own body, only now it is your architectural shelter.



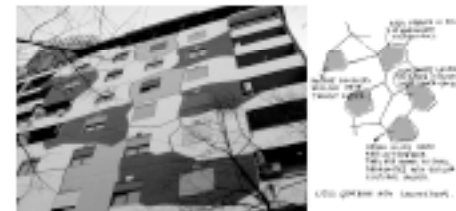
These are two pictures that expand on the idea of pattern.



I want to show you this example of the painted façades in Tirana. I think there will be another one too. But most of

you probably know about the project initiated by Mayor Edi Rama after Albania changed its political regime and became democratic. One of his ideas was to paint the façades of the city, and of course, when you are in Tirana today, most of the buildings on the main avenues are painted in these crazy patterns.

Anri Sala, an Albanian artist who lives in France, made a video<sup>3</sup> in which he interviews Edi Rama, who at some point says: “The façades are not lipstick or a dress, they are organs.” I thought it was beautiful how he pointed to the fact that actually the façade is an active surface that is alive. Just to mention one more thing here – because we will look at New Orleans, which deals with modernism in a different way – the Western Balkans actually just left modernism as it was – either just left it to rot or put a new face on top of it and in this way somehow obliterated modernist architecture.



For me, the painted façades of Tirana are also an expression of citizenship. The citizens of Tirana actually agreed to them. At some point Edi Rama held a referendum and asked people if they wanted the project to continue, and they said yes. And today new developers are actually using the same style.

<sup>3</sup> *Dammi i colori* [Give me the colours], 2003.

Tirana's painted façades are for me an expression of citizenship, an agreement that is painted on the main avenues of the city. In what they represent, Tirana's painted façades are similar to the sum of the individual houses in Prishtina.



We are now in Amazonia. The Brazilian state of Acre, which borders Peru and Bolivia, has experienced the same kind of fragmentation, and in the same period of time (roughly the last fifteen years), as ex-Yugoslavia. Only this fragmentation was a very happy one, whereas, of course, ex-Yugoslavia's was very traumatic. Why was it happy? Because the communities who live in Acre were able to obtain the territories they wanted to manage – I'm talking about the extraction reserves and Indian territories. The state of Acre, the government, actually gave these territories to the people who live in them.



When we were travelling through the region – this was after the *Lost Highway Expedition* in the Western Balkans – I

was extremely interested in the patterns and surfaces of the architecture. In Acre we saw that people were reasserting their territories by painting patterns on the architecture, like the school on the right, as well as painting patterns on their bodies. So the painted bodies – both human and architectural – start to represent the building up of society from below.

Something else I found extremely interesting. The state of Acre in fact was asking for a new agreement on citizenship. Governor Jorge Viana once said (I have a recording of this): “We don't want to be called citizens because citizenship reminds us of cities. Our citizenship is *florestania*” (from the word for “forest”). So actually, the government of Acre was asking for a different kind of societal agreement.



This is just to remind you of something similar, which we see in cities like New York and São Paulo (on the right) and in urban tattoos (on the left).



And now we come to New Orleans, where the parades are actually not just tourist attractions – as I realised when I stayed there for a while.



They become very important because the citizens appropriate the city by dancing through it. Here again, we're talking about the body. Maybe some of you remember that when the first Mardi Gras took place in New Orleans after Katrina, many people said it shouldn't take place because there had been so much suffering and people shouldn't celebrate. But it was very existential, very necessary, for people to have the parade and so to reclaim the city, to bring it back to life.

What New Orleanians also do at Mardi Gras is they throw these strings of beads at the façades of buildings. So on the right side, you see a façade – I don't know if it's clear – with a lot of beads on it. And of course, I was again reminded of the Western Balkans.



New Orleans, in short, has three messages for me. One is that, like in the Balkans, the main architectural style in the period after modernism – I mean the period now – is pre-modern. The people who are actually rebuilding the city by themselves – again like in the Western Balkans – have opted for the “shotgun house”, which is a pre-modern typology. Of course it is very richly decorated, since it is in fact a personal façade.



And of course, the neighbourhoods are very strong. You mark the territory of your house, and you also mark the broader territory.



What was for me most scandalous, and interesting, was the fact that in New Orleans, modernist architecture is being torn down. When we looked at the Western Balkans, we saw that the people there were painting over it and reusing it – balkanising it. But here in New Orleans, there has been a drive to actually demolish modernist architecture. This is the Phyllis Wheatley School, which was designed in 1955. It will be torn down soon. It's a beautiful piece of architecture, which was not flooded during Katrina, but still the city doesn't want it to be there.



And of course all of you know about the demolition of public housing. When I think about the demolition of buildings from the modernist period in New Orleans, I also think about how the International Style stood for a kind of democracy that is now being challenged in New Orleans.



Maybe this should be the last slide, since it talks about the territory the city is actually reclaiming as its own. We're looking at the wetlands. New Orleans is there near the top. In a way, the wetlands will become a new survival territory.

So just to wrap up: local democracies are going back to a pre-modern period, and their message is about survival. But as we have seen in the Western Balkans, in New Orleans and in Acre, cooperation between a democracy built from below and the government can work very well.

Thank you.