The (Un-) Homely in Bogotá: A Critical Reading of the City

Noortje Weenink

A Cycle of Neglect

The turbulent history of Colombia remains visible in the culture of distrust of the country's capital, Bogotá, which is characterized by social, political and economic disparities. Close to the colonial city centre, political and societal contrasts are accumulated in an area of four urban blocks. One by one, the four blocks perform as architectural manifestations of the contradictions, and together they present as a constellation of the contrasts and hierarchies present in the city.

The first block consists of a military recruitment battalion headquarters. It is turned inward and concealed to outsiders, but exteriorizes as a dominant presence in the area. Located next to it is an urban void, the Plaza Los Mártires, on which an obelisk commemorates the martyrs of Colombian independence. The empty plaza forms the entrance to a Catholic church that exudes wealth and worship. In the fourth block, enclosed between the battalion headquarters and the church, we find the El Bronx neighbourhood: a

hotbed of crime, overwhelmed by the decay and neglect of a former wealthy residential area.

A series of violent disruptions as a consequence of riots, war and urban policies have resulted in a long history of homelessness in and around the area of El Bronx. The struggle of the homeless to establish a place in the city and in society has created a vicious cycle of urban neglect and destruction. When upper-class citizens fled their homes during *El Bogotazo* and *La Violencia*,[1] refugees from the city centre and the countryside took shelter in the abandoned houses. The mafia and a variety of people from lower social classes followed suit, slowly transforming the neighbourhood into Bogotá's centre of crime and drug trade. In the early 1990s, the 16.5-hectare area was demolished under the pretence of regenerating it, again displacing the inhabitants. They re-established themselves in a three-street neighbourhood close by, now known as El Bronx, but the cycle was repeated when their homes were destroyed in 2016.

To respond to this steady rhythm of demolition in Bogotá, I proposed an architectural counter-project, both a critique and an alternative to the urban practices in the city. For this I first developed a methodology to understand the character of El Bronx. Through the notions of the homely and the uncanny, *The Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard*[2] and *The Architectural Uncanny* by Anthony Vidler[3] are laid side by side to gain an understanding of the paradoxical and eerie effects of the homeless dwelling in abandoned houses and the public space of the city.

Looking at the decay and neglect of El Bronx, we can parallel the social and architectural situation of the neighbourhood. Before its demolition, the neighbourhood of El Bronx consisted of three small, neo-colonial streets with around 1,500 inhabitants packed in small tenements. The colourful facades had started crumbling, exposing the bricks beneath the surface. Mud- and blood-stained armchairs and mattresses protected the people

Fig. 1. Contradictions between El Bronx and its urban context. Collage by Noortje Weenink

from the street, while rags of clothes and, if they were lucky, plastic sheets sheltered them from the sun and rain. Colours on the walls distinguished the different mafia groups operating in the area, and rainbow-bunting banners festooned the streets, shielding the dreadful situation below from a bird's-eye perspective. It created an oddly colourful yet besmirched scenery, where the 'homeless residents' felt at home in a hopeless and abominable situation.

When looked at through the lens of Bernard Tschumi's *The Manhattan Transcripts*,[4] the parallels between the architecture of El Bronx and its residents connect movement and events in space with its architectural qualities. The experiences of the residents are acknowledged through the reading of the novel *Naked Lunch*[5] by William S. Burroughs. The book follows the narration of a junkie, who finds himself in ironic and uncanny situations. Rather than directly applying the means of writing and drawing, these are transposed to place the allegiance of space and events in relation to Bogotá's Bronx. Finally, the article concludes with a brief description of the architectural project, demonstrating a critical alternative to Bogotá's cycle of decay and demolition.

(Un-) Homeliness

The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.[6]

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard examines the phenomenological significance of intimate places. Through literary explorations, he focuses on the personal, emotional response to architecture via the archetype of the house. The house, according to Bachelard, forms the architectural model to which we calibrate our emotions and memories, as well as how we experience other buildings and cities. 'Our house is . . . our first universe.'[7] It is our shelter, the secure, private space where we let go of cares and thoughts, where we allow our imagination to take over.

The recent eviction and demolition of El Bronx inherently and increasingly compromised the relationship of the homeless community with the city. The inhabitants of El Bronx considered the neighbourhood, however undefined and unproductive, their home. When it was destroyed, with nowhere else to go, they appropriated the public streets as their private shelter, seeking protection from the elements under trees and canopies, in corners and draped on stairs. Other citizens passed the homeless at a noticeable distance, anxiously avoiding their personal space. This situation can be understood in relation to the 'perceivable limits of shelter' that are created when inhabiting a space.[8] Their 'notion of home' within the public arena created an ambiguous encounter between the person seeking shelter and the person walking through the city, between the private and the public, between the homely and unhomely.

Through Anthony Vidler's investigation of The Architectural Uncanny, we may begin to better understand this unease. Through the tales of E.T.A. Hoffman and Edgar Allan Poe, Vidler begins by characterizing the uncanny as a 'quintessential bourgeois kind of fear', provoked by the 'fearful invasion of an alien presence' in a 'secure and homely interior'.[9] With the rise of the nineteenth-century metropolis and its consequential historical amnesia and alienation of the individual, the uncanny then transgressed from the confinements of the 'bourgeois interior' into the cityscape.[10] The situation of Bogotá's homeless community can be understood through this idea: first when the abandoned bourgeois houses were inhabited by people on the margin of society and, following the recent evictions, their infringement in Bogotá's city centre, creating fearful encounters between the private and the public. In both situations the common 'spatial fear' originates in the idea of 'familiar turned strange'.[11]

Examining Freud's etymological discussion in *Das Unheimliche* or *The Uncanny*, a text that Vidler himself uses as a basis, is helpful when reflecting on the situation of El Bronx. It clarifies and develops the relation

Figs. 2-4. 'The sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter'. Images by Noortje Weenink

between Bachelard's investigations into the house and architectural inti-
macy and Vidler's architectural uncanny.

The literal translation of *unheimliche* is 'the unhomely', but in English this
is often altered as 'the uncanny'. From the German word *unheimlichkeit*,
unhomeliness, Freud traces the uncanny back to the ambiguity of the word
heimlich, homely. *Heimlich* is defined as 'belonging to the house or family',
but also as 'not strange, familiar'. The adjective *heimlich* thus relates to
'being at home', and is associated with the intimate. However, *heimlich* has
a second connotation that is less obvious yet no less important. Conjugated
with a verb, *heimlich* expresses 'the act of concealing'. It relates to *geheim*,
secret. This alternative meaning reveals the ambiguous relationship of the
homely and the unhomely: the home, a 'sentiment of security and freedom
from fear', takes on the 'ominous dimensions of its apparent opposite'.
Heimlich 'develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides
with its opposite, *unheimlich*.'[12]

Bogotá's Uncanny

> *Urbanism . . . might be defined as the instrumental theory and practice of
> constructing the city as memorial of itself.*[13]

Similar to Bachelard's notion of the house, a city latches onto memories,
thoughts and dreams. It is a 'home' on an urban scale, a '(more or less)
moral and protected environment for actual daily life.'[14] With the destruc-
tion of El Bronx, its inhabitants were forced to 'infiltrate' the city centre and
thereby disrupt the secure urban environment, similar to the 'alien pres-
ence' Vidler described at the beginning of his book. In reality, however, the
homeless had always been part of the city – a part that up until now had
remained hidden to the general public, in El Bronx. As a consequence of the
eviction, this 'hidden familiar thing' was revealed, drawing the uncanny into
the city.[15] It follows Freud's train of thought, that the uncanny is 'in reality
nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in

the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.'[16]

However familiar to Bogotá's citizens, for the people of El Bronx, the city of Bogotá had never been a homely environment. The drug addicts, homeless, street children and prostitutes, but also the elderly who refused to leave their houses, were shunned by political decision makers, looked down upon by higher social classes, and even murdered in the name of social cleansing (*limpieza social*). In order to find a place in the city – and in society in general – they sought shelter and found a home in the abandoned areas of El Bronx. The abandoned neighbourhood in Bogotá formed a secure and intimate asylum for the disfavoured; a safe territory, free from the dismay of the inner city. Within the abominable circumstances, they formed a community – complete with hairdressers, hostel-like tenements and street restaurants.

Vidler explains this paradox through the literary *leitmotiv* of the haunted house (from the German expression: an *unheimlich* house). Because a house carries 'residue[s] of family history . . . embodied in its walls and objects' and plays a 'role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort',[17] the haunted house becomes a frightful phenomenon to its observers. Abandoned houses, as 'veritable figures of unhomely exile', create a similar effect. It thus makes sense that the deserted and decaying dwellings that were feared by many others became the refuge for 'those on the margin'. Only people indifferent to the terrors, paradoxes and ambiguities embedded in the buildings would feel at home in 'so disquieting an abode'.[18] This conflict between the intimate and the deplorable situation of El Bronx – between the homely and the unhomely – only strengthened the uncanny feeling in the neighbourhood and thus, perhaps, accelerated the vicious cycle of decay and destruction.

Tales of Human(e) Architecture

Looking at dwellings in relation to their inhabitants, we find a resemblance in Bachelard's and Vidler's interpretations. Both authors suggest that family histories, memories, thoughts and dreams are manifest in the architectural confinements of a house.[19] This idea of architecture as expansion of the body – the dwelling embodying life and thought[20] – is reiterated by Bernard Tschumi in *The Manhattan Transcripts*. Through sequences of scenes and movements instead of programmes, Tschumi explores improbable confrontations of space, movement and events, adopting Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory to uncover 'the disjunctions among "use, form and social values"'.[21] Similar to Tschumi's architectural adaptation of the montage method, writer William S. Burroughs uses the 'cut-up' technique of writing. Instead of providing a chronological narrative, Burroughs compels the reader into a series of surreal stories that work together as a whole, but might as well be consumed separately or in a different order.

Where traditional methods of drawing and describing architecture failed to grasp the complex collection of narratives, anecdotes and memories of El Bronx, the montage technique generates a fruitful approach to bridge them with their urban and architectural context. Burroughs has described the cut-up method as 'actually closer to the facts of perception than would, say, a sequential narrative. For example, you walk down the street. You see it and you put it on canvas . . . but that's not how you really see it or remember it. It's more jumbled. There are the street signs and the vendors and the houses and people walking. You don't see them like a photograph.'21

In Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch*, the reader follows the thoughts, dreams and memories of junkie William Lee through a first-person narration. By experiencing the situations and events in space through the lens of the main character, the eerie encounters of William Lee become a shared experience of character and reader. The readings thereby acquire an uncanny quality: the experience of terror from the comfort of being at home.

To develop a meaningful critical response the delicate political and social environment of El Bronx, understanding the nuances between the four building blocks was fundamental. Imagining and drawing the spaces that William Lee experiences in *Naked Lunch* served as an incentive to get a grip on the complex situation of the situation in Bogotá. Sketching the fictional situations contextualised the disordered fragments of the novel and connected them to an architectural and urban environment. Similarly, sketching the complex memories of and narratives about El Bronx, found in documentaries and news articles, resulted in a visual understanding of the uncanny and ambiguous situation of the four building blocks.

To become more acquainted with the inhabitants of El Bronx and their (physical) relationship to their direct architectural environments, I departed from Tschumi's drawings of the bodily experience of movement and events in space. By means of writing an exaggerated and intuitive narration from the perspective of the inhabitants of El Bronx, the overlap between their daily lives, bodies and the architectural context identified and clarified the ambiguous connections and disjunctions between the four building blocks. To refine these distinctions, a fifth character was added, representing the labour area behind the church. The comparison between the living conditions of the homeless and their built environment recognized how the inhabitants were shaped by their environment, how the vile conditions created a vicious cycle of neglect, and how distant or similar the four building blocks actually were to each other.

The Passenger (El Bronx)

Once proud Republicans, many of them had suffered over the years. An epidemic of vitiligo and psoriasis had left their faces blistered, their teeth shattered, and their skin stained. The wars had cast away their limbs, leaving them with the mere mould of their strong posture, and leaning on their crutches for support. It made them feeble . . . . Capitalism is no friend to those who bleed.
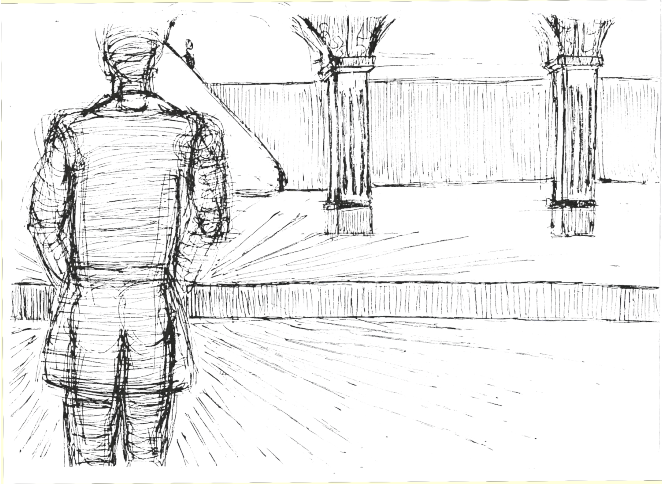
Fig. 5. Sketching the Uncanny: 'Imagine tailing somebody in a white trench coat'.

Fig. 6. Sketching a fictional Bogotá: 'Tolerance Zone'.
Drawings by Noortje Weenink

The Soldier (Military Recruitment Battalion Headquarters)
The spaces between the uniforms are as prominent as the militaries themselves. Just like the pilasters on the building, the evenly distributed voids structure the group, creating the perception of them as one object; one body; one motion. They are a vast entity, dominant and powerful.

The Leader (Church)
A boy looked in the mirror and started combing his hair. The wooden pins softly stroked his skull, polishing and unknotting his wavy hair. It had now reached shoulder-length, almost like that ugly girl from class. He chuckled at the thought . . . . His dad stormed in: 'Do I really have to clean up everyone's mess? These incapable people, they keep complaining about construction noise, painful joints, and then they ask for a raise. Do they not realize that I do all the work here? If they do not start behaving soon, I cannot be held responsible for my actions.'

The Martyr (Plaza Los Mártires)
From the very beginning, he had trouble adjusting. 'I am not supposed to be here,' he told the others, frustrated. 'We are not supposed to be here. We had so much to do, so much to say. The world was at our feet. Now these two blockheads are laughing at us, looking down from their pedestals. But what have they brought to this country? What a joke. What a bloody joke.'

The Labourer (Los Mártires)
The fat that has accumulated on the sidewalks, streets and facades forms a sharp contrast to the thin, muscular bodies of the workers. The stains of grease are a sharp reminder of the drops of sweat dripping from their faces on a daily basis, burned fat a distinct suggestion of their skins darkened by the sun.

Although, in reality, the four blocks existed in a prominent hierarchy, certain similarities can be identified through these fictional narratives. For example,

the users of both El Bronx and the military battalion headquarters strongly parallel their architectural contexts. The inhabitants of El Bronx are in the same state of neglect as their architectural environment, while the military resembles the dominant character of their building. Furthermore, we can distinguish similarities in terms of rhythms (the march of the soldiers and the labourers' dripping of sweat), as well as social concerns (both the labourer and the inhabitants of El Bronx are fighting for survival). The narratives also revealed the hidden, uncanny cycles of repetition[22] within the different areas. Every day the passenger wandered from his home through the city and back, while the soldiers continuously and collectively marched. The labourer worked, day in and day out, without any real hope for a better future.

Aside from these clear similarities and obvious distinctions, the stories also revealed some more subtle differences, such as within the daily routines of the labourer and the passenger. While both struggling for their daily survival and finding themselves in a hopeless situation, the labourer was stuck in a discriminatory system, while the passenger in El Bronx was stuck in a cycle of addiction. For the development of the architectural project these nuances were critical to understand, in order not to present a hollow critique on Bogotá's uncanny situation but rather a substantial alternative to break the vicious cycle of neglect, decay and demolition.

The Architectural Embrace

The design project The Architectural Embrace takes El Bronx as a starting point. The project addresses the situation pre-demolition, accommodating the transgressive and uncanny nature of the area. It offers an alternative to the fruitless repetition of destruction and, perhaps, to the societal neglect of vulnerable citizens in general, by negating the perceptions of the four urban blocks as well as the existing hierarchy in Bogotá.

Similar to Bachelard's and Vidler's interpretation of the house, monuments also function as an object of memory, owning 'their very name to their func-

Fig. 7. An alien, monumental structure breaks the urban grid.
Image by Noortje Weenink

tion as agents of memory'.[23] The architectural project embodies the historically neglected block of El Bronx on the junction with the three monuments already present: the obelisk, the battalion and the church. It represents and offers a tribute to El Bronx with a monumental concrete structure. The circular shape, without beginning or end, symbolizes unity and equality. It lays bare and challenges the existing social, political and architectural hierarchies by breaking through the blocks and thereby confronting the context. The design offers a potential 'home' for anyone: it lacks a specific programme or function and can be appropriated or transgressed as one sees fit.

In this proposed new monument to validate El Bronx's place in the city, the history, memories and narratives manifested in the architecture of El Bronx throughout the years are integrated in the portals using the rubble of the demolished dwellings. The circular array therefore commemorates the endless repetition of the demoralisation of the homeless. Similarly, the monument sheds light on the importance of (the history of) El Bronx by carrying the building and embracing the plaza. The result is an embodiment of the memories, histories and narratives of (the context of) El Bronx that considers the different shades of contrasts and similarities found in the analyses.

While *The Manhattan Transcripts* explore confrontations between space, movement and events, *The Architectural Embrace* focuses on the relations between context, visitor and building. On the outside, the architecture confronts the direct context and its hierarchies, while on the inside the public space is protected from those same confrontations. A high concrete wall on the ground floor and a ring of water surrounding the building protects the plaza from the chaos of the city: the solid border isolates the inside from the existing pecking order of the outside. On the first floor users have a complete overview of both the plaza and the building's context. In the polycarbonate stairwells they disappear from sight and become a moving shadow.
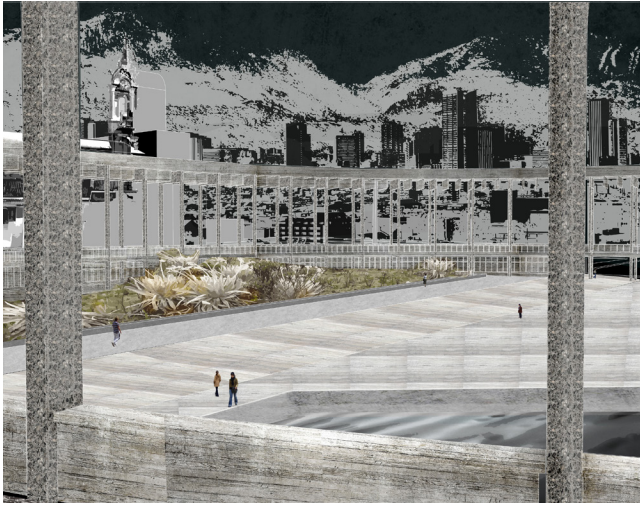
Fig. 8. The structure provides overview and security from the chaos of the city.
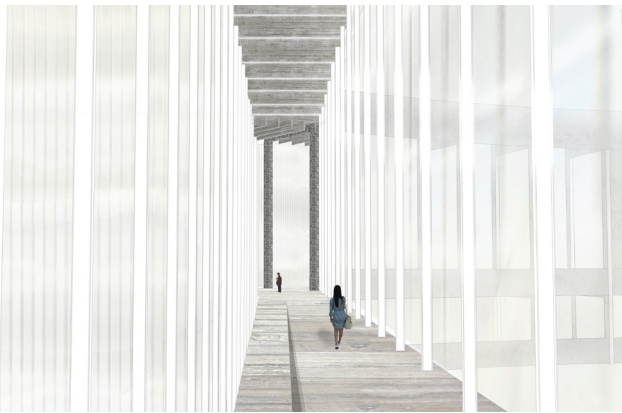

Fig. 9. Polycarbonate stairwells distort the relationship with the context. Images by Noortje Weenink

This contrast between security and vulnerability – between being safe within the borders while being able to see the 'terrors' on the outside, between looking and being looked at – again highlights the uncanny qualities of not just the context but also of the project. It considers the architectural uncanny in two ways: as the 'bourgeois fear' of the 'fearful invasion of an alien presence' by confronting the rigid urban grid with an unfamiliar, circular morphology and allowing a safe observation of the 'terrors' of the outside city from the confinements of the building, as well as the ambiguity Freud attributes to the uncanny. The continuous fluctuations from having an overview (on the first floor) and being completely enclosed (on the ground floor), between looking and being looked at (in the stairwells) – in short, from being safe and secure to being exposed – highlights Freud's interpretation of *Das Unheimliche* as the ambiguous relationship between the homely and the unhomely.

Bachelard states that 'in being, everything is circuitous.'[24] The circular project proposes the monument not just as a place of commemoration but rather as a place to breathe, contemplate and recalibrate. Surrounded by the remnants of El Bronx and isolated from the city, the empty public space invites a change in perception. By embracing rather than fearing the uncanny, one might envision a perception where people like the former inhabitants of El Bronx are not neglected and murdered, but recognized and included as a legitimate part of society.

1   On 9 April 1948, presidential candidate Jorge Eliciér Gaitán was assassinated. This ignited several days of riots in the city centre of Bogotá (*El Bogotazo*), which caused wealthy residents to flee to the north of the city. Moreover, the assassination was a catalyst for a ten-year national civil war between the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party (*La Violencia*), which led many residents of the countryside to flee to the capital.

2   Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

3   Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

4   Bernard Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981).

5   William S. Burroughs, James Grauerholz (ed.), Barry Miles (ed.), Naked Lunch: The Restored Text (London: Penguin Classics, 2015).

6   Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op. cit. (note 2), 6.

7   Ibid., 4.

8   'All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home . . . the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter.' Ibid., 5.

9   Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, op. cit. (note 3), 3.

10   Ibid., 4-6.

11   Ibid., 29.

12   Ibid., 24-25.

13   Ibid., 179.

14   Ibid., 177.

15   Ibid., 53.

16   Ibid., 55.

17   Ibid., 17-18.

18   Ibid., 20.

19   'An entire past comes to dwell in a new house.' Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op. cit. (note 2), 4.

20   Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, op. cit. (note 3), 61.

21   Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*, op. cit. (note 4), 7; Bernard Tschumi, 'Geïllustreerde index', *OASE*, 18, 18-35; J.C. Kramer, 'William Burroughs: A Sketch', *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, vol. 13 (1981) no. 1, 95-97. Retrieved from https://erowid.org/culture/characters/burroughs_william/burroughs_william_article1.shtml on 2 July 2018.

22   Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, op. cit. (note 3), 37-44.

23   Ibid., 177-181.

24   Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, op. cit. (note 2), 213-214.