

Emiliano Gandolfi
Under the City's Skin
The oppositional spaces of Lara Almarcegui

Lara Almarcegui's look into the urban environment is constantly drawn to those often imperceptible incongruities that reveal how the contemporary city truly operates politically, socially and economically. The opening to the public of land temporarily left behind in the process of urban development, the manifestation of the construction materials of a building and the preservation under contract of a wasteland are all actions that contribute to consolidating a fragmentary documentation of episodes that express an unofficial chronicle of the city. These places are the plots of a parallel historiography, antithetical to the rigid, imposing account of the political cabinets and the technical bureaus. They are the places from which that capillary narrative emerges which is composed of the slow stratification of thousands of small daily actions, of the inexorable succession of laws, and in which the development of the official image of the city inevitably comes undone.

In Graz—Cultural Capital of Europe in 2003, registered in the World Cultural Heritage Sites of UNESCO and 2008 City of Culinary Delights—the work of Lara Almarcegui was to find, among the dense mesh of restorations and the packaging of the image so totally controlled as to be apparently handled by the Tourism Office, an open space capable of rendering the true nature of the city obvious. Her first attempt was to open an empty lot to the public, to show the citizens and the tourists a place inaccessible until that moment and, even more significant, provide access to a place that was not yet planned out. The residual, the non-designed, the “what's-to-come,” have an eminently political quality in Lara Almarcegui's work. This is the possibility of being able to access a site in which the visitors can exercise something rare in the *over-designed* contemporary urban context, such as the ability to use their imagination. That ability which Henri Lefebvre previously quoted in clear opposition to the ‘subjective’ space designed by the architect: a space too loaded with objective significance, “it is a visual space, a space reduced to blueprints, to mere images—to that ‘world of the image’ which is the enemy of the imagination.”¹

But the empty lot of Graz remained closed because of the impossibility of obtaining the desired permits and Lara Almarcegui continued her search until she unearthed another city fragment that caught her attention. A hidden place in which to encounter a dimension totally different from the rest of the old town, one of those parallel conditions in which the reality emerges with intensity, just

¹ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. London: Blackwell Publishers, 1991. Pág. 361. Trad. David Nicholson-Smith.

before disappearing once again. *Hidden terrain with abandoned allotments* is a work that goes beyond appearances, to retrace in the interstices of the city's urban evolution an inexorable source of stories, of human interlacement, of interests and possible imagination. It is a work that disregards the representation or the concept of space to expand a much more complex main theme—that of space experienced. What emerges is the contraposition between the abstract space of the experts (architects, town planners, planners) and that of *everyday life*, a subjective dimension created by the decades-long venturing of citizens, of relationships, of dreams, and inevitably also clashes and negotiations.

The *hidden terrain* space experienced, with its abandoned allotment gardens, the pre-eminent vegetation, the unguarded huts, brings with it stories, dreams and conflicts that Lara Almarcegui brings back to our memory. The economic interests, the imminent plans of transformation of this area and the cancellation of these memories allow the transience and the inevitable failure to retain these stories to emerge. Lara Almarcegui's work has concentrated several times on the allotment gardens. In order to learn how to read these marginal territories and to decipher the fragility of the tracks that they leave on the area, Lara Almarcegui worked between 1999 and 2002 on the project *Becoming an allotment gardener*, in which she took care of an urban kitchen garden in Rotterdam. This scrap of land, next to a small wood, gave her the opportunity to understand the real implications of this condition of urban self-determination and to be part of a community of people who define a free space outside the rigid mesh of the city. In an urban setting in which the spaces for living, working and free time are strictly planned, the allotment gardens, because of their unique and distinguishing state as self-built and self-managed spaces, offer a dimension of obvious opposition to the rest of the city. Lara Almarcegui's goal in *Becoming an allotment gardener* was to "make a garden, build a shed, and spend hours working there, with all the implications this might have"² With this performance stretching over several years, Lara Almarcegui has had the opportunity to test an urban condition, with the only instrument possible: everyday life.

Lara Almarcegui's allotment garden never had exceptional yield. Too close to the trees, it did not have enough light to flourish. In addition, in the last year of the project, the artist's frequent absences to pursue projects abroad heaped on her a litany of criticism from the community of market gardeners, not to mention a lack of understanding and negative opinion from the art world. But, in a certain way, the project's failure from the formal point of view was a fundamental experience for understanding the nature of the city, its hidden qualities and the subtle social plots that hide behind the physical manifestation of the area.

² Almarcegui, Lara. "Lara Almarcegui" *Becoming an allotment gardener*. Bruselas, Establecimiento d'en face projects, 2003.

From the point of view of the perception of the urban context, the work of Lara Almarcegui fits into the definition of *psychogeography* as Guy Debord and the Situationists intended it: the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals³. This new awareness of the urban landscape casts an alternative look on our urban landscape, traces new priorities, and redirects the glance. In her work, Lara Almarcegui tests firsthand the limits of our definition of city and construction. She gives us documentation—as in the case of the maps of the wastelands of Amsterdam, Liverpool, and São Paulo—from which we can reconstruct parallel geographies. Her experiences and observations leave opinion open; they define simply a frame of the places of interest and leave us free to identify their qualities, their possibilities and their consequences. It is thanks to the opening of this new urban imagination that we collect these oppositional spaces, through which we can see under the city's skin.

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³ Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* 1955, from <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>, website visited in May 2010.