

## PREVI: 45 YEARS OF RESILIENCY

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FROM SUSTAINABLE TO RESILIENT CITIES

*The urban, which is indifferent to each difference it contains, often seems to be as indifferent as nature, but with a cruelty all its own.*

Henri Lefebvre

**I**n contemporary urbanism the concept of resiliency was adopted from the natural sciences, where it postulates how ecosystems can withstand events of crisis and are able to adapt in those critical moments that can lead to an outcome of extinction or survival. The term has been widely used in Landscape Architecture, Urban Design and Architecture academia as the new contract with the contemporary city.

The prolific scientific monitoring of climate change and recent cataclysms such as Hurricanes Katrina in New Orleans, Sandy in New York or the current drought in California has put an emphasis on hydrological planning, water management and other environmental concerns and their impacts on our built environment. These factors have urgently produced trans-disciplinary urban studies where ecology, geography, and the environmental sciences are fusing with urban and landscape design.

The international journal of landscape architecture and urban design *Topos* dedicated its June 2015 issue to the theme of Resilient Cities and Landscapes, where Diane E. Davis, Professor of Planning at the Harvard GSD writes:

Resilience is now the watchword of our times. It is promoted as the rationale for a new and expanding repertoire of tools that will guide us to a secure urban and global future. But resiliency is a tricky word, veering into the ideological.

The resilient space is one of crisis, one of immediacy and sometimes one re-constructed by catastrophe. Today, the challenge of the resilient city is not solely to attain a symbiotic relationship with nature, but one of adaptation and optimization to ecological, economical and global forces. Recently, the resilient city has transcended the notion of the sustainable city.

PREVI

*PREVI, a grand competition promoted by the Peruvian government and the United Nations, of universal importance.*

Fernando Belaúnde Terry

From 2013 to 2014, the Landscape Urbanism program at Woodbury University explored zones that demonstrated resilient acts of urbanism within the region of the Tijuana/San Diego border region. This area's development is product of dialectical landscapes, where the developed world meets the developing one, full of contrast and examples of resiliency. And as the research expanded to Latin America the characterization of resiliency began to diversify

beyond the ecological urgency presented in North America.

In 2013, as part of the second semester design studio, graduate students from the Landscape + Urbanism Program visited the city of Lima, Peru. The brief of the studio was to study and collaborate with the Lima municipality, to produce an urban design scheme for a post-industrial site adjacent to the Rimac urban river. As we surveyed the city and conversed with professors from the Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería our attention shifted to a very distinct and experimental housing development along the Carretera Panamericana built in the late 60's early 70's—PREVI (Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda).

In 1966, Peruvian President Fernando Belaúnde organized, along with the United Nations Development Program, the experimental housing project that included the design of prefabricated and modular social housing typologies with the help of Peruvian and international architects. PREVI'S urban master plan was under the direction of British architect Peter Land, along with prominent international architects such as James Stirling, Atelier 5, Christopher Alexander and Charles Correa, among others. The 1500 home development included a variety of pedestrian walkways, large urban parks, schools and parking areas for residents.

President Belaúnde was an architect trained at the University of Texas and a modernist in every sense of the word, including his ideas of urbanization, which had influence from the rational planning layouts encouraged by CIAM and Le Corbusier. PREVI—like many projects during this era of late modernism that intended to apply design at a large scale, including design of cities and infrastructure (i.e. brutalism, metabolism, etc.)—was part of an intent of liberal social politics to bring order and humanitarian design to a region that soon would be reshaped by political unrest.

On October 3, 1968 a coup d'état during Belaúnde's term would change the rational and programmed path of PREVI and begin

its long and resilient future of adaptation and bottom-up process of maturity. It is important to note that the military government did not condemn the project, yet it only promoted other nationalistic (anti-imperialistic) driven forms of development.

Although the coup d'état of 1968 did not completely interrupt PREVI's development, the military regime rejected this model to address the need for new low-income housing and the project of social development dissolved into organized squatter settlements and self-built housing.<sup>1</sup>

PREVI's future and regulated growth (by architects) was no longer sustained by the new government and its new residents had to find "resilient" methods in order to maintain the urban form and vitality of the neighborhood. As in many regions of Latin America during the XX century, national scale projects failed the Corbusian dictum "Architecture or Revolution" that was critical to modernism political ideology.

Later, the onset of postmodernism critique of the modernist machine aesthetic via the introduction of historical and semantic references in schools of architecture added to the abandonment of PREVI by the new generation of architects as an avant-garde proposal for housing in the Americas. A sentiment that is still notably present today in the academic milieu of Lima's schools of architecture.

#### FROM REVOLUTIONARY TO RESILIENT

As the graduate students from Woodbury University explored the dynamics of what was left of PREVI, an interesting debate flourished

<sup>1</sup> Barry Bergdoll et al., *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*, 2015.

among students, local university professors and residents of the neighborhood. The lines of inquiry were directed toward the informal character that PREVI took after the military government pulled the support for the project.

The dialectical dispute here is between architectural purism and individual freedom. After the political unrest of 1968, the inhabitants of PREVI took the liberty to modify and expand the original prototypical housing models designed by the group of international and national architects. The housing units began to morph into what is now an eclectic formalism of applied decoration, security screens and multi-story additions; the whole neighborhood changed from a modern rational plan to a resilient landscape of street activity, ground floor markets and inner connected networks of housing clusters, or what Margaret Crawford might call “Everyday Urbanism”.

Some contemporary Lima architects we spoke to call attention to the fact that the residents’ freedom to express their identity or individuality is a legitimate act, yet they feel that the project’s capacity to generate formal and spatial relationships was breached, not only physically but also civically—the modernist ideal of a coherent social-construct and total control through architecture failed once again.

PREVI presents another layer of resiliency, produced out of political unrest, economic uncertainty and the vicissitudes of late modernism in academia and politics. Within these conceptual contexts, the neighborhood also endured the morphological adaptations of the city of Lima, fluctuations in population, the petrol crisis of the 1970’s and contemporary issues like water shortage and clean air. PREVI’s ability of self-organization was a key to its resiliency by responding to the set parameters of the original plan, yet it was able to build upon this datum and evolve into a thriving community on its own.

In 1965, Christopher Alexander, who participated as one of the 12 international architects in the development, wrote the seminal text “A City is not a Tree”, where the tree is a type of lattice structure that as it progresses it encounters restrictive conditions—as a diagram it represents designed cities or “artificial” cities. On the contrary, cities that express a variety of overlapping sets (people, houses, trees, sidewalks, etc.) are “natural” cities. Therefore, and in the manner of Alexander, PREVI’s resilient urban tactic of survival was to bifurcate from an artificial place to a natural one.

The end result of the visit to Lima was a short film produced by the graduate students documenting the current state of PREVI 45 after years of its conception. The documentary includes the testimonial of several residents who have lived in the development since its construction and the academic opinions of architecture faculty from the Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería, regarding the urban impact and prototypical housing designs of the project.

In March 2015, the curators of the exhibition “Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, chose the short film to be showcased along with original drawings and sketches of PREVI. The film was the only contemporary testimony if any project across Latin America in the exhibition.

The film’s visuals show a PREVI that is unrecognizable from its original plans and photographs during the building process. The individual taste of the inhabitants has grafted with the purism of the canonical modernist project. Its program has evolved from a housing project for young families to refuge, for many elderly who have always called PREVI their sanctuary. Yet, its streets and promenades are full of children and young students who attend the school in the complex, a promising and open urban space for city life.

PREVI, in the end is not a perfect act of urbanism, yet within the contemporary concepts of “resiliency”, it presents a tangible precedent to understand the potential forms of cities to come.

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**Guadalajara, México.**  
**Agosto 2015**



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